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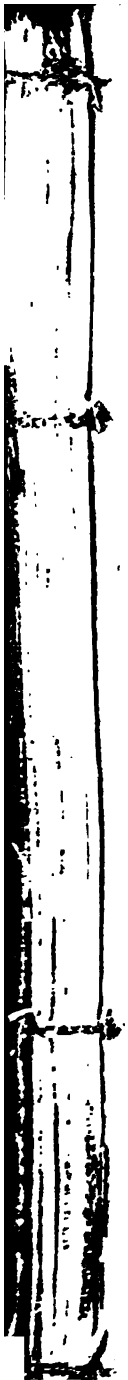
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11

12

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17

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"I was able at length to take my good sword in both hands."

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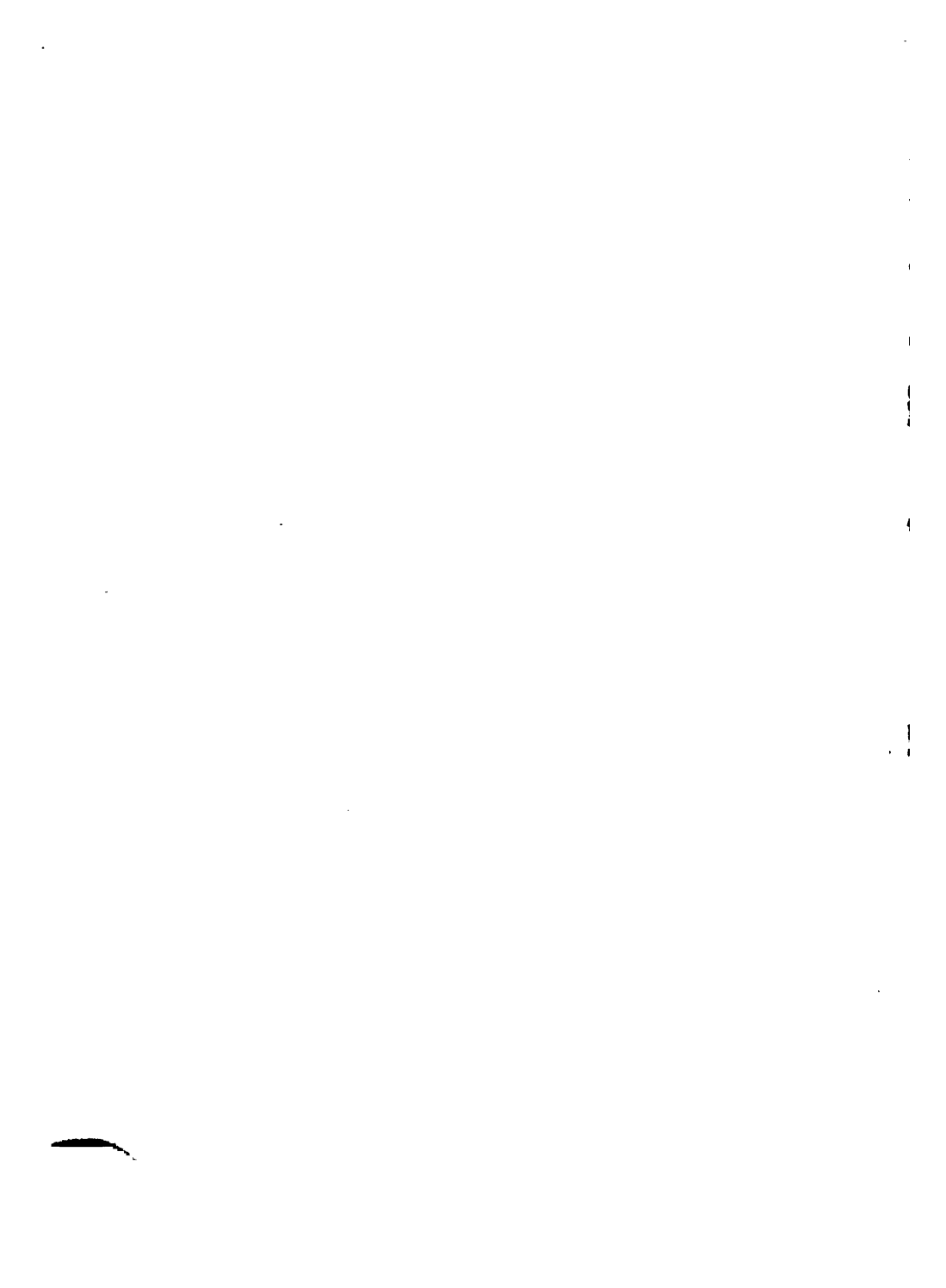
THE HEIR OF HASCOMBE HALL



"Drawing near, he bent the knee."

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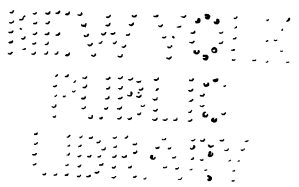
The
Heir of Hascombe Hall

A Tale of the Days of the Early Tudors

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By
D.C.
E. EVERETT-GREEN

Author of "A Clerk of Oxford," "The Young Pioneers," "French and English,"
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CONTENTS.

I. A MELANCHOLY RETURN,	9
II. HASCOMBE MILL,	27
III. WHICH IS WHICH?	45
IV. AFTER TEN YEARS,	64
V. LORD JAMES,	82
VI. THE WITCH'S SON,	101
VII. THE PERILS OF TRAVEL,	119
VIII. THE PRIOR'S COURT,	137
IX. A TOWN HOLIDAY,	156
X. IN THE FOREST,	174
XI. A BAND OF BOYS,	192
XII. "THE KING'S SON,"	210
XIII. LORD HASCOMBE,	229
XIV. FATHER AND SON,	247
XV. THE PRINCESS,	266
XVI. A DIVIDED HOUSE,	284
XVII. A STEPMOTHER'S POLICY,	304
XVIII. EDMUND'S RETURN,	323
XIX. FINDING A FRIEND,	342
XX. THE WORD OF A PRINCE,	360
XXI. PRIOR AND PRINCESS,	379
XXII. JUST IN TIME,	397
XXIII. LORD HASCOMBE'S HEIR,	415
XXIV. COMING OF AGE,	434

1928

JUL

TRANSFER FROM C. O.



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

Ernest Prater.



I WAS ABLE AT LENGTH TO TAKE MY GOOD SWORD IN BOTH HANDS,	<i>Frontispiece</i>
DRAWING NEAR, HE BENT THE KNEE,	<i>Vignette</i>
HE WAS WORKING AT THE BIG NAIL WHICH FASTENED HIS EAR TO THE POST,	106
LAY HANDS UPON ME AT YOUR PERIL,	215
FOR SHAME TO TREAT IN THAT COWARD FASHION A FAITH- FUL HOUND,	280
BY THE BONES OF ALL THE HOLY SAINTS, 'TIS MY NEPHEW EDGAR!	344
MADAM, WHERE IS THE BOY THAT YOU KNOW BY THE NAME OF EDGAR HASCOMBE?	395



THE
HEIR OF HASCOMBE HALL.

CHAPTER I.

A MELANCHOLY RETURN.

“WHO dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills!”

These words, many times repeated, sometimes in tones of fierce anger, sometimes in accents of profound melancholy, were spoken by the younger of two wayworn travellers, whose weary horses were patiently and laboriously picking their way through the dark forest tracks, as the long midsummer day drew to its close, and the twilight stole upon them almost unawares.

“Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills!”

The elder of the two riders, who was somewhat in advance of his companion, turned in his saddle, and spoke sharply,—

“Tush, boy! A truce to idle threats! If you save your own skin by getting safe out of this accursed country, you may thank your good star for the boon. As for any thought of vengeance—poof! It is worse than folly to dream of it.”

The face of the young brother of Lord Kildare darkened at the sound of these words, but he made no reply; only his lips moved, and then set themselves in lines of resolute defiance.

“It has been a mistake from beginning to end,” pursued Lord Hascombe, speaking as much to himself as to his companion. “I have known that ever since we landed in England, and found only a handful of men ready to join our standard. James, we need not blind our eyes any longer. That youth was no more the Earl of Warwick than you or I. He was an impostor, palmed off upon us. He was a puppet set in the place of a living man, of whose person Lord Lovel hoped to get speedy possession, either by force or strategy, and to substitute for the puppet. We have been deceived from first to last, and Heaven alone knows what will be the forfeit some of us will be called upon to pay!”

“Duchess Margaret of Burgundy thought differently,” answered young Fitzgerald, with a touch of sullenness in his manner. “Would she have sent two thousand men to fight for an impostor?”

“Cleverer women than the Duchess Margaret have been deceived before now,” answered Lord Hascombe. “The boy was personable, and well drilled in his part. But Henry Tudor, who sits upon the throne of England—a curse upon all usurpers!—is a cleverer man than the late King Richard. *He* would have killed the boy ere this; and then a clever tale of imposture might find credence, and spread and increase. But when the real earl can be taken abroad

and shown in London town to those who have known him from boyhood, what chance is there for the impostor?"

"You believe that story, then?"

"Ay, James, I do; and you had best believe it also, and make the best of what is a bad enough tangle."

"Bad enough, when two Fitzgeralds lie dead upon the field of Stoke!" cried the youth, breaking out suddenly into one of his gusts of passionate anger. "May I only live to avenge their death upon Henry of Richmond! I will never call him king! He is a murderer of lawful kings, and of those whose rights are better than his own. He is the murderer of Kildare's brothers. Let him beware of the family motto, 'Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills.'"

Lord Hascombe slightly shrugged his shoulders. He knew well the fiery temper of the Fitzgeralds. His beautiful young wife was a sister of the Earl of Kildare, and he had often been a guest at the ancestral home of her family. Indeed, it was upon a recent visit to Ireland that he had become embroiled in the present revolt, which has gone down to history under the name of the revolt of Lambert Simnel, and which ended so disastrously and speedily for those concerned in it, on the field of Stoke.

Lord Hascombe was in some considerable perturbation of mind, and that not without cause. He came from a family of ardent Yorkists, and although without any strong personal attachment to the late King Richard, who had paid the penalty of many crimes upon the field of Bosworth, fidelity to the cause to which he was attached by

strong hereditary bonds had led him to embrace the cause of Richard when Henry asserted his claim, and to fight for him at that battle; and he had distinguished himself on that occasion by many feats of signal daring, so that Henry Tudor had taken note of him, and asked his name and rank.

No hurt had come to him for that act of opposition to the man who now reigned as England's king. Henry had been wise in his policy of conciliation, and had posed as the man who united in his own person, as well as by his subsequent marriage with Elizabeth of York, the rival claims of the houses of York and Lancaster.

If this claim could not be pushed too far, or too closely scrutinized, at least it suited the needs of the hour, and the people as a whole were ready to receive it without overmuch criticism. The power of the great nobles had been broken by the conflicting fortunes of the War of the Roses. The country was crying aloud for peace. Henry, from motives of policy as much as from any other cause, was willing enough to adopt a course of leniency and reasonable moderation. Very few suffered death or attainder at his accession—only those few whose property was required to swell the kingly wealth and power of the new monarch. The rest were pardoned and suffered to go their way; and Lord Hascombe had brought his fair young wife to Hascombe Hall, in the hope of living there in peace and quietness for the remainder of his life.

But his evil star seemed in the ascendant. Some business connected with the lady's dowry had obliged him,

though most reluctantly, to leave her some few months since. He had hoped to be absent only a few weeks, but had been detained by unforeseen difficulties ; and, worst of all, he had been drawn into this rash revolt against the newly-made king, and had been persuaded to fight in person in the cause of one whom he now firmly believed to be nothing but a vulgar impostor.

And how would the king regard this second offence ? Lord Hascombe was possessed of one of those highly-strung natures at once rash and timid. In the hour of peril, when he was worked up by stress of excitement, he would throw prudence to the winds, and embark upon any cause that seemed to him just and right, and which commanded his sympathies at the moment. He was full of chivalrous daring, and eager to espouse the side of the weak and oppressed ; but when the hour of stress was past, and reason had had time to assert her calmer sway, he would become cautious to the verge of timidity ; and though never afraid to meet death upon the field of battle, he was in terrible fear of the disgrace which might meet him within the walls of his own house.

It was this fear of consequences which was now pursuing him, and dogging his steps like a grisly phantom.

Every man is disposed somewhat to over-estimate his own individual importance. Lord Hascombe was not one of the great nobles of the kingdom, but he did not feel that he was obscure enough for his recent act of rebellion to be passed unnoticed by the king and his council. There was no reckoning upon the policy which

would be pursued with regard to this outbreak. It was one thing for the newly-made monarch to condone the offence of those who had resisted him at the outset—policy and justice alike dictated such moderation; but how would it be when these same men mixed themselves up with rebellions and seditions which had for their object the dethronement of the king and the setting up of a rival in his place? Might not Henry feel that the best way of putting a stop to all such movements for the future would be the taking of an exemplary vengeance upon such as had been known to be concerned in this abortive attempt? It was known that the king had a great idea of the power of his prerogative, and that he intended to be ruler in his kingdom in no ambiguous fashion.

Lord Hascombe was turning over all manner of uneasy thoughts in his mind as he rode homeward in the gathering dusk, with his wife's brother for his companion. What would be the best course for him to pursue in the future? Should he appear at Westminster and ask pardon of the king for his act of folly? Or should he carry off his wife, and escape to Ireland with young Fitzgerald, and wait there till the storm had blown over, hoping that perhaps if his flight were speedy and secret, the very fact of his return might remain a secret, and the world believe that it was a mistake which reported him to have been present at the battle of Stoke?

The more he thought of this plan the more feasible did it appear to him. His wife would be delighted to return to Ireland. She had not rooted herself in any way in her

new home. It was absolutely necessary that Fitzgerald should get safe out of the country as fast as possible, and why should they not all fly together? Then they would see what line the king took, and how far he inflicted chastisement upon those who had joined the standard of revolt. They would at least be safe from personal peril; and if the offence were condoned or passed over, they could safely return home when the excitement had somewhat subsided.

There was one element of difficulty in this scheme, and that was the little baby boy who had been born during Lord Hascombe's absence from home. The child was but a month old, and had been delicate and frail. Would it be possible for a tender infant to undergo the fatigues of a hasty journey? And if not, would the mother consent to be parted from her child for a while? It was no uncommon thing for ladies of rank to put out their children with foster-mothers for a time, and perhaps this had already been done with the heir of the house of Hascombe. But that was a different matter from leaving him altogether; and young mothers were so different in the way in which they regarded their children. Some took but little notice of them, treating the baby rather in the light of an animated toy, to be played with at intervals; whilst others would scarcely be parted from it night or day, and regarded with jealousy any person seeking to gain any hold upon its infant affections.

It was the thought of wife and child at home that was spurring on the weary traveller to take this last long stage

of a toilsome journey. But for that, the travellers would have paused ere this and sought the hospitality of some wayside inn, for they and their horses were alike jaded and exhausted.

But the country had become familiar to Lord Hascombe ; now every tree and stone was known to him. They had out-riden their two attendants in their haste to be once more within the walls of a home.

Although Lord James Fitzgerald had never yet been to Hascombe Hall, the thought of the welcome he would receive from his sister, and the sympathy she would give him in his sorrow and his rage, spurred him as strongly as did yearning love his elder companion.

"Thank Heaven we are at our journey's end!" cried Lord Hascombe at last, drawing rein before a pair of great gates, which he dismounted to unfasten and swing open. Even the exhausted horses seemed to realize now that they were within measurable distance of the sorely-needed rest and food, and finding a pleasant grass road beneath their feet, they started into a hand-gallop of their own accord. Soon the riders had entered a fine quadrangular courtyard, and serving-men were coming hastily out, in great astonishment at seeing their master arrive so unexpectedly, and in such sorry plight.

"There is trouble abroad, good Parr," said Lord Hascombe to his head groom. "I and your lady may have to start forth again in a very short space. Let it not be known that I have returned. Keep the secret for the present in the household. Times are full of peril and

difficulty. My head may not be safe, a week from this. We live in troublous days—troublous days. But give me news of your lady, and the boy. I have heard naught but the fact of his birth.”

“My lady is well, and as bright as a bird,” answered the faithful servant, as his master slowly dismounted with the air of a sorely weary man; “and the little lad is doing bravely now, though he was but a small morsel at the first. Good Mary Beetel of the mill has him. She was with my lady here for three weeks, but had then to return home, and took the little master with her. My lady goes twice a day to the mill to see him, and they all say he is thriving there better than he did at home.”

“Good,” said Lord Hascombe, with a sense of sudden relief. “No better home could he have than that with the honest Beetels.”

But he could ask no more, even had not his own impatience to see his wife driven him towards the house, for already the rumour of the master’s return without warning had spread through the place, and at that moment a door from the courtyard into the main building was thrown wide open, and, in the glow of yellow light that streamed forth, there appeared a slight, girlish figure with shining hair, and arms outstretched in welcome.

“My life, dearest life!—my own beloved lord and master!”

“Geraldine!—sweetheart!—wife!”

He clasped her in his arms; he almost carried her up the flight of wide steps down which she had flown to meet

and greet him. Together they passed into the great baronial hall, dark with its sombre panelling, grim with its trophies of arms, and great antlered heads of majestic deer, or the tusked, fierce face of some wild boar of the woods.

Upon the raised dais at the end a small table had been set, and servants were hurrying to and fro, bringing forth good cheer for the welcome of the travellers; but hunger and weariness were alike forgotten by the husband, as he drew his fair young wife to his side, seeking the shelter of a deep embrasure where the shadows fell dimly, and where they were half concealed from the eyes of the hurrying servants by the fall of a tapestry curtain.

“My life, my dearest life, how good it is to see thee! Ah, what terrible days of anxious sorrow I have known!”

“Thou hast been anxious for me, sweetheart? But wherefore? What didst thou know?”

“Know? Why, that men were whispering of rebellion; were telling of what Kildare was doing, and of the German and Irish soldiers that would land upon these shores and proclaim another king. Did I not know that thou wast with Kildare, and that thy heart was as his heart, and had never inclined well towards Henry Tudor? What could I not fear? What should I not fear? And every day as it passed by, and fresh rumours swept through the land—ah, what have I not suffered! But thou art safe, thou art well, thou art home again in mine arms. Now I fear no longer.”

He held her to his breast, and covered her face with

kisses. In that first moment of meeting he would not speak of the peril in which he stood. Let them be happy together for one short hour. But as she raised her face from his shoulder, to gaze into his eyes, and make sure that it was her own dear lord again, and no dream or vision, her glance swept across the hall to where a second figure sat outstretched in a great oaken chair, weary, dejected, heart-sick, despairing; and when she saw it she sprang to her feet with a little cry.

“James! James! It is my brother!—Paul, why did you not tell me? Ah, there is something the matter.—James, speak! What is it?”

Young Fitzgerald was almost past speech. He had received several slight wounds during the desperate fighting at Stoke, the marvel being that he had escaped the fate of his elder brothers. But the long ride, and the sense of crushing defeat and peril to come, had taxed his strength to the uttermost, and he scarce heard the frightened exclamations of his sister as she hung over him, calling to husband and servants to bring wine, medicaments, cordials—fear and misgiving taking the place of the first joy which had filled her heart upon seeing her husband again.

“He has been wounded; he has been fighting!” she cried, with white lips.—“And thou, Paul—wert thou there also? Tell me—has there been a battle?”

“Ay, and a day of disaster for the cause Kildare embraced—he and all his house. Thou wouldst not have had thy husband hold back when thine own kinsfolk were in the field?”

Her face had turned very white, but her eyes were clear and full of fire.

“Nay, never, never; but it is all so strange and terrible. Hast thou indeed borne arms again against the king?”

“I have—” He stopped suddenly, as though he would have spoken more, yet knew not what to say; and at that moment young Fitzgerald’s eyes opened, and he spoke,—

“Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills!”

The old family legend was familiar enough to the ears of Lady Hascombe; she glanced at her brother and then at her husband.

“He has a touch of fever. He keeps saying that over and over again. If we could get him to bed, and he could sleep, that would be the best thing for him. He will want all his strength for what lies before us on the morrow.”

“Sleep!” cried young Fitzgerald, in the same low, whispering tones. “Ay, there be those whose sleep is sound! Thomas—Maurice—who will wake them, save the last trump of doom? But they shall be avenged—ay, verily they shall be avenged! Does not the blood of the Kildares run in their veins? ‘Who dares kill Kildare—’”

Geraldine’s horror-stricken face was turned upon her husband; every drop of blood had ebbed from her cheeks.

“What does he mean? Oh, what does he mean? Thomas!—Maurice! Husband, husband, tell me the truth.”

“The truth is a sad one, my life. Your two brothers were too truly slain at that grim battle from which we have just come. How young James escaped I know not,

for he fought with the fury of his name and race. It was less a battle at the last than a slaughter. The German troops stood at bay, with the wild Irish kerns beside them, and were hacked to pieces by Henry's men. 'Twas a sight I can never forget. Scarce thought I to leave that bloody field alive myself—"

But at these words his wife suddenly flung herself into his arms, weeping with the abandonment of her excitable Irish nature.

"Tell me no more! Tell me no more! I cannot bear it! Ah, was not my heart a true prophet when it beat so heavily these many days? Thomas! Brave young Maurice! Alas, alas! a curse upon the fatal day! And a life yet more precious to me in such deadly peril!"

She clung to him, sobbing, exclaiming, weeping out wild words of sorrow and menace. The blood of the Fitzgeralds was in her veins, together with the wild traditions of a wild race. Anger and grief battled together in the slight, girlish frame that shook with the tempest of her passion; and her husband had much ado to still the storm, though he set himself tenderly to the task; whilst the servants bore James Fitzgerald to a sleeping chamber above, and gave him soothing draughts and such nourishment as he could swallow, and the sleeping potion which quickly had the desired effect, and which might do more for him than food and medicine put together.

Husband and wife sat down at length together at the table in the great hall. Geraldine's tears were dried, and the first tempest of her grief had subsided. She was all

eagerness now to see her lord refresh himself after his long and toilsome ride; his jaded looks went to her heart, and she repressed her own grief and anxious questionings to minister to his pressing needs. Both felt that much had yet to be spoken that night; but for the moment they, as by mutual agreement, let anxious themes go by, and wellnigh, in their joy at being once again united, forgot the sorrows by which they were surrounded.

“And thou hast not told me yet of the boy,” said Lord Hascombe, drawing his wife close to him with his arm. “I can scarce believe yet that I am a father and thou art a mother. Thou art hardly more than a child thyself.”

Geraldine gave her head a bewitching little toss, and there was a touch of maternal pride in her face and voice as she made answer,—

“Ah, it is a pity he is not here. It is but a week since Mary carried him home with her. She said the air was not so good—that we were too much shut in here by trees—that he would thrive better with her. He is such a little morsel, but pretty. Ah, thou shalt see him for thyself. He has such dainty little hands and feet, and the hair on his little head lies already in golden rings. Mary says it may perchance come off, but I will not believe it.”

“And is he strong and healthy?”

“Not sickly, but not so robust as Mary’s boy, who is some few days older. He is such a rogue, and Mary is so proud of him! I trow thou wilt think little Edgar the prettier; but baby Edmund is a fine little fellow. And I scarce know which Mary loves the better.”

“ You had the little one christened ? ”

“ Oh yes—he seemed so frail and sickly. The priest came at once. I bade them call him Edgar, for thou hadst said thou didst wish that name if it were a boy. They took him to Mary, and when she was able she came here with both the boys, and would have stayed, but she was so sure the mill suited them better, and I thought she knew better than I.”

“ Yes, yes ; I am glad that he should be there in such kind keeping. And thou, sweet wife—would it go very hard with thee to part for a while from thy boy ? ”

She looked at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“ Part from him ? What dost thou mean, Paul ? ”

“ I mean, sweetheart, that I fear for the king’s displeasure. Twice have I been found with arms in my hand against him. Thou art the sister of Lord Kildare, and this plot, as ’twill be called, was hatched within his walls. Will he forgive this ? Will he forget ? Truly, he might forget, were we to flee away in secret and give his wrath time to cool. Perchance it might not even be certain that I had ever landed in England, if we were to fly at once back to thy brother’s house. Faithful Martin here will in all things seek to keep the secret and administer the property in our absence. Beetel and his good wife will care for the boy as though he were their own. It will be, I trust, but for a short time ; and when we know that the king’s wrath will no longer pursue us, we can come again and live in peace.”

Lady Hascombe’s eyes had dilated as the thought of her

husband's possible peril recurred to her mind. She looked nervously round the hall, as though enemies might be lurking in the shadows, and clasped her hands round her husband's arm.

"Art thou indeed in peril, my beloved? Then let us fly. Let us lose not an hour. Ah, have I not suffered enough without this last fear? If they come and take thee from my side, and cast thee into the king's prison, I must surely die!"

He put his arm around her trembling form, and drew her tenderly towards himself.

"I think in very sooth we had better be quickly gone, for our own sakes and that of young James, thy brother. But the journey will be long and toilsome, by sea as well as by land; and 'twould be beyond the strength of any tender infant, even if we could have taken his foster-mother with us—a thing too much to ask even of the faithful Beetels—"

"But Mary will care for him as her own till we get back, or till he be old enough to be brought to us!" cried Lady Hascombe. "Good Mary loves him scarce less than her own. She will care for him and keep him as the apple of her eye. We need have no fear for him."

"And thou canst bear to part from him?"

"Ah, yes, if it be for my husband's sake. I cannot be parted from thee again, my life. That would kill me, in sooth. But if I know the boy is well cared for, I can leave him awhile. 'Twill not be for long. Thy life and James's may be in peril. Oh, let us not tarry!"

"Not more than one day, sweetheart. To-morrow night shall see us far from here. But we must give young James this night for rest, else will he drop down by the way, and see his home no more. We will take horse and ride with all speed to the port of Bristol, and thence we will sail for Ireland. Thou wilt like to see thy childhood's home again, sweet wife, and regain in thy brother's halls the bloom which England has taken from thy cheeks."

"I shall feel safe there," answered Geraldine. "Here I often lie wakeful at night, fearing I know not what, but feeling as though some dread doom hung over me and mine. Let us away, and then perchance thou mayest make peace with the king's majesty, and we may feel free and happy once more. But, oh, if thou hast been seen in arms against him in this rebellion, it may well be that shouldst thou linger thou mightest be torn from my side and taken I know not whither; and how could I live then?"

Her fears were very great. The anxieties she had suffered during the period of her husband's absence had left their trace on her; the news of the death of her two brothers was another shock; and Lord Hascombe saw that, for every reason, the sudden departure would be the greatest relief to her, even though she had to leave her first-born babe behind. But in Lady Hascombe the maternal instinct was not very strongly developed as yet, whilst her passionate devotion to her husband was the mainspring of her being. She would gladly have taken horse that very hour; but he assured her there was no

such pressing need for haste, and he had much to see to ere he left home again for an indeterminate period.

“And I must see the boy,” he said, his heart yearning towards the infant upon which his eyes had never yet rested.

“Ah, yes, thou must see the boy,” answered the mother; and as she noted the weariness and exhaustion in her husband’s face, she tenderly begged him to leave all else, and secure the remainder of the night for sorely-needed repose.

So quiet and silence descended at last upon Hascombe Hall, whose lord and master had returned in such haste and secrecy in an hour of peril, only to make ready for a flight as hasty and as secret upon the morrow.

CHAPTER II.

HASCOMBE MILL.

THE long, low, timbered front of the mill dwelling-house lay full in the light of the setting sun. The thatched roof shone golden in the soft level beams. A tangle of wild roses and honeysuckle filled the air with fragrance, and the music of falling water made an everlasting lullaby.

The mill itself, to which the dwelling-house was an adjunct, almost overhung the great pool, and the wheel turned rapidly with the falling water, churning it to snowy foam. The woods that lay all around fell away from the mill-house with a rapid drop in the ground, so that there was always abundance of air and light; and the trees immediately round the house being pines and firs gave out an aromatic and health-giving fragrance, and kept the place dry even through the autumnal fall of the leaf.

For the times of which we write, the house was wonderfully well built, and spoke of prosperity and thrifty management; and, indeed, there was no more thriving family in all the borough and neighbourhood of Gadhelm

than that of the worthy Beetels. Michael Beetel, the head of the house, was the mayor of the rising little town of Gadhelm; and as this was on the king's demesne, such an office meant not a little, as will presently be shown. John Beetel, the miller, was his eldest son, and there had been Beetels at Hascombe Mill as long as the mill had stood. It had passed from father to son for many generations, and each generation had left its mark in some improvement to the dwelling-house, the mill buildings, or the small farm attached, if the holding could boast such a name.

Michael had been the first of the millers who had retired from the business, so soon as he had a son old enough to take his place, to build himself a house within the walls of the town, and give himself up to the business of the commonalty; but for many generations the Beetels had been free burgesses of the town, and had had a stake in its interests and liberties, and they had one and all been eager in the extension of its rights and privileges, astute to take advantage of the troubled state of politics and the needs of the monarchs to extend the limits of their charter, and liberal with their share towards the gift of money by which such extended privileges were purchased.

During the past quarter of a century, with its never-ending strife betwixt White Rose and Red, its changes of rule, its bitter wars betwixt the nobles and their rulers, no one had more keenly watched the temper of the times, or been so quick to see the right moment when a forward step might be made by the burghers, than Michael Beetel,

the miller of Hascombe. So it was small wonder that, when his eldest son was old enough to be installed in the mill, he should respond to the oft-made requests of the townspeople, and take up his abode amongst them, where he was speedily chosen by them to fulfil the chiefest offices that appertained to the burghers of Gadhelm, and regarded as a tower of strength in their midst.

John, the miller, was, however, of a different temper from his father. Although by no means indifferent to the public weal, he was himself a man of retiring habits and peaceful proclivities. The music of the falling water and the whirling wheels of his mill were dearer to him than any strife of tongues; and though he paid his share of the burdens of the town, and owned the rank of a free burgess, he did not often take active share in the disputes and excitements which prevailed there so often, but remained content with the daily round of peaceful life, and the society of his wife and children.

Furthermore, he had married a little out of his own rank—a thing very unusual in those days. Mary Beetel was the daughter of a poor esquire, who had been taken suddenly ill whilst passing through Gadhelm, in company with his daughter, a girl of some seventeen summers. He had died at the inn, which was kept by John's uncle, Henry Beetel; and the girl, who seemed to have neither friends, kindred, nor money, had been left broken-hearted and desolate upon the hands of the honest Beetels.

John, a shy but susceptible and soft-hearted man, who had hitherto showed no disposition to marry, although he

was twenty-seven years old, suddenly came forward as a suitor for the hand of the desolate maiden ; and since this seemed the best way out of the difficulty, the marriage was carried through almost before the girl herself understood to what it pledged her.

Yet never had union proved more peaceful and happy. John made the kindest and gentlest of husbands in times when conjugal gentleness and consideration were not greatly in vogue. Mary recovered from her loss, and blossomed into a beauty which astonished all. She loved the old mill, and toiled with all her might to make the plishings of her home such as would please her husband's eyes and remind her in some sort of the life of the past. So her clever fingers, besides the regular task of spinning and weaving, worked tapestry hangings for some of her rooms, manufactured mats and rugs for her floors, and wove curtains for her windows. She still read the few books that had been her father's, that she might teach her children the art of letters ; and her lute hung upon the wall, and was sometimes taken down in an evening, whilst her husband lay back in his oaken chair, and smiled to hear the soft strains which her fingers evoked, and the sweet, warbling notes that issued from her lips.

Three children—two boys and a girl—were born to them during the first five years of wedded life. Then for six years more they remained without any addition to their family. Now the old oaken cradle had been brought into use once more, and stood beside Mary, as she sat upon the broad seat of the porch, gently moving it with her

foot as she crooned a little song, the while that her fingers rapidly plied her needle. And in the cradle were two small occupants, lying sleeping side by side—two yellow-haired babies, with placid, expressionless faces, though one of the pair was more robust-looking than the other, and the yellow down upon his head had none of the soft curl that distinguished the more fragile-looking boy.

Mary was now beginning to miss the sounds of child-life about the place. For several weeks her little ones had been absent on a long-promised visit to an uncle, who lived some thirty miles distant, in the thriving seaport town of Portsmouth.

Visits in those days were matters difficult of arrangement, and when they were accomplished they lasted a considerable time. Mary did not expect her brood back for other two months yet. Hitherto her attendance upon the two infants had occupied her whole time and thought; but sometimes she now began to wish that she had her children, to show them their new brother, and the little babe who would one day rule over Hascombe, and be the lord of the manor to them.

She was roused from her reverie by the sound of horse-hoofs along the road which led from Hascombe Hall, and she sprang at once to her feet. She had been surprised that Lady Hascombe's daily visit had not yet been paid; but having seen no one from the great house, no rumour had reached her of the sudden and unexpected arrival of the lady's husband and brother on the previous evening.

Lady Hascombe had generally paid her visits to the

mill on foot, since by the footpath the distance was scarce a mile; but this evening she was mounted, and in the trim of a traveller, and at the first glance Mary saw that her face was pale and troubled, and that her eyes had been shedding tears.

The next moment the miller's wife uttered a startled exclamation, for behind his wife rode Lord Hascombe himself, and he looked pale and stern, as though he had lately passed through some painful experience, or was facing some stress of peril.

John Beetel had heard the approach of the horses, and now came hurrying out of the mill to hold the lady's palfrey. She slipped to the ground before anybody could approach to help her, and running towards Mary, who stood beside the cradle making her respectful reverence, she almost threw herself into the kindly arms of the miller's wife.

"O Mary, Mary, what shall I do? We have to fly, and leave our little boy behind us!"

"To fly, my lady?" repeated Mary, aghast. "Oh, surely my good lord is not in peril again!"

"But he is, Mary, he is. Thou hast heard a rumour perchance. I have not time to tell thee all the tale; but my brothers in Ireland joined the cause of one they judged to be the rightful king, and they gathered troops, and my lord joined with them, and they landed in England a short while since, and have fought a desperate battle against King Henry. And now, when all is lost, he must needs fly—fly ere it be well known that he has been back to his home. And I must fly with him. We are

already on our way. We must to Ireland—to my brother Kildare. With him we shall be safe. But the boy—the boy—our little son! Such a hasty journey as that—and to take him from thy good care—it would be his death!”

Mary's face was full of concern and sympathy. She loved her lady right well. She had been almost like a friend to her during the past months, when Lord Hascombe's absence at such a time left her so lonely and dependent upon any who could give her sympathy and help. Lord Hascombe had always been beloved in his own neighbourhood for the kindly consideration he showed to his servants and tenants in the collection of his dues, and in the enforcement of his manorial rights; and his beautiful young Irish wife had won all hearts by her graceful, gracious ways, her childish helplessness and appeal, and her sunny spirits. Mary felt almost maternal towards her, and set herself now to soothe and comfort her in the best way that she could.

“Nay, truly, the little lord must not take such a journey; but do not grieve, sweet mistress. Only leave him here with me, and he shall not lack a mother's care and love, if I may be so bold as to speak such words. It will not be long ere my good lord shows to the king's majesty that he is no traitor or evil-doer. Men say that the new king is a man of merciful temper, and would rather be friends with his nobles than drive them to rebellion. In a short while the trouble will be over, and the little lord will have grown strong and fair and fat, and will be able to lisp ‘mother’ when he sees you again.”

Lady Hascombe's tears had been falling when she poured forth her trouble into Mary's ears; but already she was smiling, with an April look upon her fair face.

"I cannot leave my lord again; I cannot let him leave me; I must go forth with him. But I know thou wilt care for the boy, good Mary. I can be happy, knowing him in thy hands. But give him to me now; I must needs show him to his father."

Mary bent over the cradle, and taking thence the fragile-looking babe with the rings of golden hair, she wrapped him in the coverlet and placed him in his mother's arms. He opened his eyes, and seemed to smile in her face. Lady Hascombe, with a little sobbing laugh, bent down and hid her face against his.

"My jewel, my precious, my own little boy!" she cried, and a tear fell upon the child's face. But she was resolved not to let her husband see her weep. His great trouble throughout had been the thought that he was bringing so much sorrow into her young life. Child as she was in some things, Lady Hascombe was a woman in love for her husband. Never a word of reproach had passed her lips for the trouble which his rashness had entailed upon them; and she was going forth with him now, to face discomfort and possible peril, without a murmur of vexation or reproach.

She glanced backward to where Lord Hascombe stood in close conversation with the miller. She knew he had certain charges to give to honest John, though she did not know exactly what they were. She waited, playing with

the child, kissing and caressing him, until he turned towards her; and then, with a proud air of youthful motherhood, she came forward and laid the little bundle in his arms.

“Our little Edgar—our little son! See, Paul, is he not pretty? Is he not sweet? Saw you ever such a dainty little babe? Kiss him, husband mine, kiss him! Is not his little face like a rose-leaf? See, his tiny hands—are they not wonderful? Was there ever such a babe as this before?”

Lord Hascombe bent over the babe, feeling a strange constriction in his throat. His first-born child! The long-expected son and heir! And this was his first sight of the babe—himself a fugitive from the probable wrath of an offended monarch, come to snatch a hasty kiss, and then to ride for his life, his brave young wife beside him; to remain away he knew not how long, though he hoped and trusted that a year or two at most might see him back again.

The pride and joy of young fatherhood within him was drowned by a rush of sorrow and remorse.

“Alas, alas, my wife! To what a pass have I brought you!”

“Nay, but what happiness hast thou brought me by thy love, good my lord,” she answered bravely; “and is not this sweet babe the best pledge of the happiness we shall yet see together? If we have to leave him now, it is but for a time; and with our kind and faithful Mary he will be as safe as though he were at Hascombe Hall, the young

heir of all. Kiss him, Paul, and give him back to me, for we must not tarry. The shades of evening are falling now, and we must make the best of the short summer night, and reach the coast by dawn of day."

She was the braver of the two at this supreme moment, for she saw that he was almost broken down by all he had passed through during the past days, and that she must be strong for his sake; so she kissed the child without a tear or a tremble, only showing her emotion in the passionate straining of the little form to her breast. Then she placed him in Mary's arms, dropped a kiss upon her cheek, whispered a few words in her ear, and turned resolutely away, suffering herself to be lifted upon her horse without so much as a sob or a sigh.

It was Mary whose tears rained down as she watched the little cavalcade wind away downwards through the wood. She saw the flutter of a white kerchief, and she made the infant in her arms wave a tiny hand, though the mother could not see it; and then she laid him once more in the cradle, kissing both the boys with soft maternal kisses, and vowing in her heart that the little foster-son should never lack a mother's tender love, or feel that there was difference made betwixt himself and the son of the mill.

Her husband's voice aroused her from her meditation beside the cradle. He had gone a part of the way with the riders, and now returned. His honest face was grave and thoughtful, and there was a furrow between his brows that told of thought.

“Poor lady, poor young mother!” said Mary softly, coming and laying a hand upon her husband’s arm. “Would that her lord had not so embroiled himself with this revolt! Knowest thou aught of the matter, husband?”

“Oh ay; I have heard it spoken of in the town, but in England there has been little stir, for men have had too much of strife already, and having accepted Henry Tudor as crowned king, want no further disturbance and strife anent the matter. Moreover, it seemeth well known in London town that the young Earl of Warwick is safe there in the king’s custody. Wherefore, whoever this man be who calls himself by that name, he is nothing better than an impostor. And, again, the English nobles and people care not to be led in any matter by the Irish or the outlanders who have espoused the cause of this youth. ‘If we want a king, we will find him for ourselves,’ say they; and such being their temper, there was little chance for the success of this plot, be its merits never so good.”

“If only our good lord had seen as clearly!”

“Our lord is but young,” answered John, “and the young are led too easily, and his lady’s brothers and kinsmen urged him on. Good-lack, they have paid dear for their rashness. Two of them were slain at the battle, of which we shall soon get news from without. One rode away with them but now, looking more like a ghost than a man. Pray Heaven they get safe across the sea to their Irish home! It is an ill thing to provoke a monarch too far.”

“Ah, John! thinkest thou that our good lord will fall into disgrace?”

"Nay; how can a poor man like myself judge of such matters? The king showed a reasonable temper once, but none can say how he will continue. In truth, I think that our lord does well to fly for a while. And thou, wife, must not speak to living soul of his visit here. Did our gracious lady tell to thee what her good lord told to me?"

Mary's eyes were fixed upon her husband's face. She saw that he had heard more than herself of the present situation. John sat down on the wide seat in the big porch—the great thatched porch that was almost like a small room, which he had built himself with a view to his wife's enjoyment of the beautiful view which it commanded. He looked down at the sleeping babes, an honest compassion in his eyes.

"Thou must speak to none of our lord's visit here, Mary. It is to be bruited abroad that our lady has gone to join him over in Ireland, taking her child with her."

"Taking her child! But, John, how can that be? The child is here!"

"Ay; but he is to pass as our son, Mary. The gossips must be taught that we have had twin boys. Already, it seems, a rumour has got about that such is the case. The sickness in the town has kept us free from comers and goers, and it seems that already Martin the bailiff, who has foreseen trouble these many days, has spread the report. A few may wonder, and a few must know the truth, but in time it may well be forgotten. Thou art the mother of twin sons, my Mary, and none must know different save

the few from whom the matter cannot be hid, and who will keep it secret for love of our lord."

"But wherefore?" asked Mary wonderingly.

"Marry so," answered John, the furrow in his brow deepening. "Thou knowest that the prior of Gadhelm Priory hath ever laid covetous eyes upon the broad lands of Hascombe. It is feared by our lord that were he to know that the boy was here, he would seek to gain possession of his person, to bring him up in such fashion that bit by bit he would gain possession of all. He might well get the king to disgrace the father and give possession to the son: there be tricks and enow that the lords ecclesiastical are masters of. Wherefore our lord thinks the only real safety for the boy lies, till his return in peace and prosperity, in being reared as our son, brought up with our young Edmund, and treated in all things like unto him, not knowing even himself that he is of noble birth, till the father and mother shall return to claim him."

"But surely," said Mary, with wondering eyes, "that will be long, long before the boy will be grown enough to understand the gulf that separates noble and burgher?"

"Ay, ay, most like, most like; but in troublous times we can see but short way ahead. If it be that the king's wrath has been deeply stirred by this plot and rebellion, our lord may be several years ere he can return. True, the boy may be sent to him in foreign parts; but when I spoke of that, he shook his head, and seemed like a man half distraught. Trouble and fear have so weighed upon him that he craves only to know that the boy will be brought

up in safe obscurity as our son, till he can come and claim him; and he offers in exchange for this such good things in the way of remission of dues and taxes that we shall e'en grow rich, wife Mary, if so be that the young rogue lives any time in our keeping."

"Our lord was ever generous," said Mary, "and my lady has given me more already than my poor services merit. If it be their wish, we will e'en do their bidding, but I trust and hope it may not be for long. That poor young mother—she will not be content to be long sundered from her boy."

"If she live, poor lady," said John, with a grave look; "but she is like a fair, fragile wind-flower. I fear me she has been set in too troublous times for her peace and safety."

Mary shook her head sadly. She had sometimes felt the same. Lady Hascombe had always been a very delicate creature, and how would she bear the fatigues of the hasty journey by land and sea, and she scarce recovered from illness? The miller's wife lifted little Edgar from the cradle and strained him to her heart. For the moment he seemed almost more to her than her own boy, so deeply did she yearn over him in his almost motherless state.

"The rogue will be well enough off himself," said John, as he watched the action. "It is for the poor young mother that my heart bleeds, and the father, whose rash folly has made him a fugitive from his home. It is not for us to judge our betters, yet it seems oftentimes as though the great ones of the land were but scantily dowered with prudence and foresight."

For Lord Hascombe's plan things could not have happened better. In ordinary times it would have been well known in Gadhelm by this time that Mary Beetel of the mill had born a little son, and was nursing also the infant heir of the Hascombes; but it so befell that an outbreak of the so-called sweating-sickness had attacked the little community, and Mary had earnestly begged that friends and neighbours should keep away, lest the contagion should be brought to the mill-house. Moreover, John, in the interests of his trade, had to be very particular whom he permitted to approach his premises, or how his own people went to and fro into the town itself.

Thus it came about that when it was openly reported by the lord's bailiff, as he rode to and fro, that twin sons had been born at the mill, there were none who contradicted; for the few who knew the truth were sworn to secrecy, and both Lord and Lady Hascombe were so well beloved in the place that anything which was for their better security, and in opposition to the proud and exacting prelate of the neighbouring priory, was certain of favourable hearing and strict observation.

Furthermore, it was said that Lady Hascombe had gone to join her husband in Ireland so soon as she was able to travel, and that she had taken her child with her. The suddenness of her departure provoked some comment, but it was said that she feared the sickness both for herself and the boy, and that for this reason she had paid no farewells, but had set forth almost in secret, with only a few servants in attendance.

Some local excitement was caused by this news, and there was more when rumours of the recent battle came to be circulated in the place. It was said that the king's sheriff had ridden over in hot haste to Hascombe, as though in pursuit of the master, only to be met with the reply that the master was still in Ireland, and that his lady had started not long since to join him there. He had asked many questions, and had seemed ill-pleased at the news, but he had been forced to ride away again, grumbling to himself; and for some time faithful Martin the bailiff had lived in fear and trembling of a repetition of the visit. But he had done what he could on behalf of the absent lord, and had sent many a fat buck and store of fat capons, and some excellent wine from the cellar, as a present to the king's favourite adviser amongst his nobles, and trusted that by these acts of diplomacy he might avert further questioning and further displeasure.

Lord Hascombe's name certainly figured in the reports circulated about the ill-starred expedition and the desperate battle of Stoke, but there seemed great uncertainty as to whether or not he had been there. The fact that he had been visiting his wife's Irish kindred, and that many averred they had seen him in arms on the field of Stoke, spoke strongly against him; and yet proof positive appeared lacking, and the journey to Ireland of Lady Hascombe seemed to point to the conclusion that her husband was still there.

In Gadhelm the people indignantly denied the charge laid against Lord Hascombe. It was known that the prior

was very busy seeking to collect evidence against him, but that made the people the more strenuous in his defence—the more resolved not to believe that he had had anything to do with the rebellion.

Once Mary was thrown into a great fright by seeing the portly prior ride up the bridle-path from the town to the mill, and she knew that she must have all her wits about her to baffle the interrogatories of so astute a questioner; but she resolved that, come what might, she would never betray her lady's trust and her lord's secret. And in the end the prior had to ride away baffled, though he had felt certain before that there would be something to be learned from Mary of the mill.

Lying and equivocation were eminently distasteful to Mary, but when put to it she could play the part of deceiver well; and we of a more enlightened and scrupulous age must not think too hardly of those who erred in this manner. For the church had taught them all too well her own casuistry, and to do evil that good might come was one of her favourite maxims, to which she lived up in a perfectly consistent fashion.

Although the order of Jesuits was not yet, there was much of the leavening spirit abroad which actuated them later on. If an object were good and right, the means whereby that object was to be attained might be very doubtful, might even be wrong in themselves, but the end in view was sufficient excuse for all crooked methods in reaching it.

When this was the teaching and the practice of the

church, and when the dignitaries in high ecclesiastical offices showed themselves more rapacious and unscrupulous than any other class of the community, it must not be wondered at that the people thought but lightly of small falsehoods and equivocations, when they believed they were forwarding a good cause. The fault was not in the individual, but in the spirit of the age; and the main blame rests with those who, whilst professing to be the shepherds and teachers of the people, gave them such example of crooked dealing and unfaithfulness in word and deed.

This explanation may serve to account for the fact that, in the midst of an honest-dealing and truth-loving family and community, the fiction that Edgar Hascombe was Mary Beetel's son was able to grow and flourish, in spite of suspicions from various sources, and the fact that the real truth was known to at least half a score of persons.

CHAPTER III.

WHICH IS WHICH?

“**M**ETHINKS I must go into the town on the morrow, Mary,” said John the miller, coming in from his work as the shadows began to fall. “The sickness hath greatly abated, and the Assize of Bread is to be held. My father will look that I should be there, and in sooth there be many things I should well like to do in the town. Thou wilt not have any fear?”

Mary knew that the Assize of Bread was a great function in the place where her father-in-law was mayor for the year, and that for the third time. In his capacity of king’s clerk of the market he occupied an important position, and his sons would be expected to rally round him, together with the other burghers of the city. There was likely to be some small disturbance at the assize, owing to the grasping and autocratic spirit shown by the prior of Gadhelm, who owned certain tenements within the town walls, and certain lands without the walls, but in the borough, not included in the priory precincts. Over these properties he was always making those vexatious claims which were a cause of ceaseless strife all over the country betwixt the

burghers and the ecclesiastics. The mayor and burgesses contended that their rights of administration extended everywhere throughout the borough, save that part of it which was walled in as the precincts of the priory; whereas the prior claimed jurisdiction and legislation over all the property owned by the priory. He sought to claim the taxes of the residents there, which the burghers contended should be paid into the common fund for the maintenance of the common burden and the payment of the king's taxes and king's ferm. And besides this, he sought jurisdiction in all matters wherein the tenants of the priory lands had been found guilty of light weight or other offences, although, as the goods had been fraudulently sold within the town to the citizens and their families, the mayor and burgesses claimed the right of judging and punishing such offenders, and of holding their assize without interference from the prelate.

There was therefore always doubt as to whether the various assizes of bread, wine, ale, and so forth, would be carried peaceably through, or whether there would be some collision between burghers and ecclesiastics. That the mayor represented the kingly authority in Gadhelm, as in most towns that were part of the royal demesne, was never disputed by the priors; but they claimed the right to send an officer to sit beside him and share in the assize, and this claim was indignantly repudiated by the citizens. Sometimes the dispute would wax hot, and would be the cause of a riot in the place; sometimes the assize passed off quietly and peacefully. Much depended upon the

character of the mayor of the year, and the prior who ruled within the cloister walls; also whether there had been any recent cause of strife and vexation between the two parties, or whether some common peril had banded them together to repel an encroachment which threatened them all.

The sickness which had passed over the town of Gadhelm—or Godhelm, as it was indifferently written and pronounced—had done something to allay the chronic irritation, since the monks had shown themselves brave and charitable in their good offices for the smitten ones. But, as opposed to this, the prior was of a haughty and autocratic spirit, and disposed to push his rights to the uttermost limit; and it was quite uncertain whether or not the day would pass without conflict.

Mary knew that her husband took a keen interest in civic matters, especially one with which his own trade was so nearly connected. He also had a personal cause of enmity towards the present prior, who had done his utmost to obtain powers from Lord Hascombe to make some alteration in the course of the stream, the effect of which would have been very disastrous to the trade of John's mill. Luckily for him, Lord Hascombe had stood firm, and the prior had been forced to yield the point; but there was always an uneasy feeling in the miller's mind that he might find a way to circumvent the lord of the manor, and take advantage of his absence to carry out his plan. It was one that many priors had sought to achieve by guile or purchase, since it would give them a far better supply

of water for their own mill and fish-ponds; and the question had been debated times without number between the various priors and lords of Hascombe. But hitherto the victory had always remained with the lord of the soil, who saw only too plainly that what was gain to the monks would be eventual loss to him.

John Beetel was human enough to take a keen interest in any struggle in which the prior was likely to get worsted, and he was anxious to take his place amongst the burgesses at the assize. Mary raised no objection. She knew her husband had been more tender with her fears for the baby boys than ninety-nine out of a hundred would have been. She herself was in want of many things which John would bring back from the town, and she took some pride and pleasure in getting out and brushing his best holiday suit of russet cloth, with sleeves slashed open after the fashion of the day, though drawn together by a lacing, showing the linen of the snowy shirt beneath; and Mary's pride was that her husband's linen should be of the whitest and finest seen amid the city burghers. His close cloth cap matched his coat, and was adorned by a gold band; but his hair was cut close to his head, instead of hanging down his neck after the fashion of the day; for John was wont to say that in his trade long locks would be an impossible adjunct, and need far more attention than he had time to bestow on them.

In his leather band he wore a dagger in a fine steel sheath. All citizens carried arms of some sort at that period, and were not backward in using them when brawls

arose. But the use of arms was a necessity to every man, as at any time he might be called upon to fight for the liberties of the realm or the borough; and at least he had to appear when summoned at the king's muster of arms, and he must bring with him then as many weapons as he was possessed of, to show his condition and importance in the state.

Mary, like a good wife, took considerable pride in her husband's bravery, and everything he wore was brushed or polished to the highest pitch of perfection. He kissed her and kissed the children before starting forth in the early freshness of the late August morning; and Mary stood to watch him going down the zigzag bridle-path which wound along the wooded hillside to the valley beneath, in the broad meadow lands of which stood the thriving little town of Gadhelm.

It was a quiet day at the mill, for the assize was practically a public holiday, and the great wheel was still, as there were none to come and go with their loads of corn to grind.

Mary spent the day happily enough with her baby boys. She had almost come to look upon both as her own now, though there was a secret sense of pride and pleasure as she realized from time to time that the little infant with the soft golden rings clustering round his brow would one day be lord of the manor, and ruler of the broad lands upon which his present home was built.

Both of the boys had thriven and grown apace, and were now as fine and healthy specimens of babyhood as

one could wish to see. Little Edgar was still not quite so big as the infant Edmund, but the difference was scarcely patent to any but a mother's eyes. Both had the eyes of baby-blue common to most very young children. The mother would look into their little faces, and wonder whether, as time went on, they would grow widely different in aspect; for, lying side by side in their roomy cradle, they looked singularly alike.

John came home before sundown, leading a pack-horse borrowed from his father, laden with stores for the household needs, and a few small fairings for his wife, such as he seldom failed to bring her when he visited the town alone.

Whilst she unpacked, admired, sorted out, and put away these things, he sat at the well-spread board and told her the day's news. There had been a few collisions betwixt the citizens and the prior's servants, and a sharp contention as to whether a baker living within the city walls, but on prior's property, should be punished by the civic or ecclesiastical court for the light weights found in his possession. The matter was not entirely settled even now; but John said that his father had been very firm, although he had preserved a temperate self-control the whole time. The burghers rallied round him to a man, and it was probable that the defaulter would be summoned to appear before the civic authorities, let the prior fume and threaten as he would.

Mary, who felt small love for the prior just now, could not but rejoice in anything which tended to the diminution of his claims. She and John sat hand in hand in the

porch when the supper was cleared away, talking of many things—the affairs of the township, the future of their children, the best means of getting home the three elder ones before the autumn rains should come and make travelling difficult. There was no cloud on Mary's spirit. She had forgotten her fears of the sickness, now that it had so much abated; and it was not till a few days later, when John came in from the mill at mid-day, complaining of thirst, weariness, pains in his limbs, and dizziness in the head, that her anxieties returned, and she recalled with dread the many tales she had heard of the rapid approach of the sickness, and its too-often fatal results.

In great anxiety for her husband, and in terror for the babies, she sent off instantly to the town with the news of her fears; and before the shadows of evening fell, Jane Beetel, John's sister, was on the spot, taking charge of the patient, who had certainly an attack of the sickness upon him, and seeking to keep Mary out of his room as far as possible, on account of the children.

The laws of contagion were little understood in those days, and common-sense had to take the place of knowledge and training. Mary strove to be careful, but she could not altogether keep away from her husband, although Jane was the best of nurses, and had had great experience of this particular "sweating-sickness," epidemics of which were only too common throughout the country in those days. She had herb draughts of her own compounding to allay the fever and thirst and modify the worst symptoms; and although John's attack was a sharp one,

she kept up Mary's spirits by prophesying a speedy and good recovery, which in fact he eventually made. But before he was in any way convalescent, or indeed able to recognize those about him, Mary herself was prostrated by the disease; and though she fought and fought the premonitions, and refused to give way, lest she should add to Jane's cares and anxieties, she was forced at last to take to her bed, where she lay for hard upon a month, knowing nothing, speaking no intelligible words—so near, in fact, to the gates of death that those about her doubted whether she would ever return from thence or not.

When Mary's eyes opened at last to a consciousness of her surroundings, she was lying in her little upstairs room; and from the angle at which the sunlight slanted in, she divined that the sun had sunk lower in the circuit of the heavens than when she had last observed the dancing beams. The house seemed strangely quiet, though the familiar sound of wheel and water made a murmur in the air. A small fire of logs was burning on the hearth, and there were phials and cups and platters on the table beside the bed which looked unfamiliar to her eyes.

Mary sought to lift her head, but was unequal to the effort. She looked at the hand which lay upon the coverlet, and saw that it was white and thin almost beyond recognition. Dreamily she became aware that she must have been ill, but she was too weak to wonder about it. She wished that John would come, but had no means of summoning him; and presently she fell asleep from sheer weariness.

That sleep was the beginning of a steady recovery. For many days she did little else than sleep, and take food from the hands of husband or sister-in-law. Gradually, as strength and memory returned, her mind became clearer, and it was not long before she asked eagerly,—

“The children—the babies—how are they? Where are they?”

“Mother has the three elder ones,” answered Jane. “Robert had business this way, and brought them back with him some fifteen days since, but mother decided to keep them with her till thou wert strong again. The babies are with Deborah at the farm. They both had the sickness, but none so bad. She nursed them through it, and they are sound and strong again. They are thriving apace on asses’ milk and whey. She is so proud of them, she will be loth to give them back when the time comes.”

Mary was satisfied for the moment, but as her powers returned she hungered after her children, and especially after the baby boys, who till now had been so dependent upon her maternal care. She spoke of them every day; she asked how soon it would be prudent to bring them home; and the first time she was able to get out and about, she begged her husband to set her upon the horse, and take her across to Caleb Pastern’s farm, that she might see Deborah and the babies.

John would not consent to do this quite so quickly, but in a few days’ time he decided that the risk would not be too great, since Mary was gaining ground every day, and old Dobbin’s broad back made no uncomfortable seat. He

would not trust the leading of the horse to any other person, but walked beside the creature himself. It suited him very well to spend a few hours at Pastern's farm. A great deal of the corn he ground came from thence, and he wanted to talk over the harvest returns with his brother-in-law.

Deborah Beetel had married Caleb Pastern some few years since, and Michael Beetel, the youngest son of that family, lived under their roof, learning the art of farming as it was then understood. Pastern, though a dweller without the walls, had all the rights of a free burgess, and though he paid somewhat higher for his stall in the market and his storage room in the Guild Hall, he was in every other respect entitled to the full privileges of a regular citizen, and he never sought, by any of the subterfuges of some of the dwellers without the walls, to escape his just share of the common taxes and burdens.

Distances within the limits of the borough were not large, as a rule. It was to the common good for the inhabitants to draw together as closely as possible. Pastern's farm lay in the direct route from the mill to the town, and when old Dobbin had descended the winding path through the leafy woodland, and reached the level ground below, the grey stone of the farmhouse walls could be seen peeping through the scattered groups of trees, and the yellow fields of corn and stubble stretched away in the direction of town and river.

Pastern's farm was a building of more substantial construction than was common at that date, although men

were making great strides in this respect, and the Beetels had shown themselves able to set an example to their less-enterprising neighbours. Stone had been largely used in the construction of the dwelling-house, although the roof was of the warm thatch that was still a favourite material for that purpose. The yards which lay round the house were not too cleanly, it must be allowed; but in an age when even the streets and lanes of the city were regarded as a convenient place for putting all rubbish and waste, even from workshops and slaughter-houses, this was scarcely to be expected. There was a little enclosure behind the house, fenced off from the pigs and cattle, where Deborah grew her herbs and a few hardy flowers, and where she was often to be found in fine, warm weather, sunning herself as she sat at her wheel or plied her needle. The door from this garden opened straight into the great farm kitchen, where several buxom wenches were generally at work when not in the dairy or cow-shed, and the mistress of the house could watch them at their tasks whilst pursuing her own meantime.

She had evidently heard the sound of horse-hoofs approaching, for she hurried out to meet the guests, her face beaming a welcome, though her movements were impeded by the chubby little urchin who clung persistently to her gown as she advanced.

“What! Mary, or the ghost of her! Now right well are ye welcome, the pair of you.—Lift her down, John, and take the horse to the stable.—Why, Mary lass, I was but saying to Caleb this morn that I must needs go up and

see thee ; but what with the baking and the brewing and the butter-making, and the harvest not yet all in, and so many extra mouths to fill, I have not had a moment to call mine own.—Cuthbert, thou rogue, give thine aunt a kiss, and run and find thy father and tell him.—Oh yes, Mary ; he can understand and speak plain enough an he will. But come in, come in ; thou must be weary to death.”

In truth Mary was tired, though she had borne the journey well. She had scarce breath to speak the words that were trembling on her tongue ; but Deborah divined them, and gave the comforting reply,—

“The babes ? Oh, they be well and thriving. Thou shalt see them anon, when they have come in. Susan has them out in the air in a little carriage that Caleb built for Cuthbert when he was so weakly a year ago. Thou didst hear that they had had the sickness ? But I have noted that if very young children sicken they do die incontinently, or else make quick recovery. There were a few days when I feared ’twould be the first with them, but then of a sudden they took a turn, and have gone on mending ever since—a pretty pair of twins as ever I saw.”

For the Pasterns shared the prevailing belief that both the boys were Mary’s own. Deborah had had sickness in her house when the little heir of Hascombe Hall and Mary’s boy had been born within a few days of each other, and having always heard of two infants at the mill, she had fallen into the common error.

Mary only smiled. She was beginning herself to feel as though both boys were hers indeed. Not a word had reached them so far from the parents, and had any summons come, she would have found it almost as hard to give up little Edgar as to be parted from her own boy Edmund.

She was led into the house, and made comfortable on the oaken settle, and regaled with some of Deborah's excellent home-made wine ; but her heart was hungry all the while for the children, and when the sound of infant babbling and crowings could be heard approaching, she rose hastily to her feet in uncontrollable excitement.

"Nay, sit thee down, sit thee down," said Deborah firmly. "Thou art trembling like an aspen leaf. I will bring the boys to thee. Thou art not fit to walk alone."

Mary sank down, because she must needs do so. Excitement showed her her weakness as nothing else had done. But she was not kept waiting, for Deborah was brisk in her movements, and in another minute the two little boys were placed upon her lap, and she had bent over them and pressed kisses upon each baby brow.

There was a mist before her eyes at the moment of meeting, but it passed away, and she gazed hungrily at the two infants.

They lay on the couch beside her, cooing and gurgling in baby fashion ; but Mary looked from one face to the other, and back again to the first, then raising her eyes to Deborah's, she asked, with a note of anxiety,—

"But which is which?"

"Nay, that is more than I can tell," answered Deborah, laughing. "Since they both lost their hair, and little Edgar's golden rings disappeared, there have been none to tell which was Edmund and which Edgar. I put ribbons on them once, but they pulled them off, and not one of us can tell which boy is which. We thought perchance that their mother would know."

Deborah spoke lightly—it seemed a small matter to her if the twin boys exchanged names; but Mary's face grew white with distressful emotion, though this was put down to her lack of physical strength.

With straining eyes she gazed from one placid, expressionless face to the other. There seemed nothing to distinguish one babe from the other. Both had the grey-blue eyes of infancy, both the indeterminate features which are common to most infants. Mary knew that there were no birth-marks on either child; yet hitherto, seeing them every day, she had never had the smallest difficulty in distinguishing between them; and she believed that had she had them all the time, she would have known them apart, even without the aid of the golden curls of the little Lord of Hascombe. But it was five weeks and more since she had seen them last. Both children had been ill, both little heads were bald, and there was not an ounce to choose between them in the matter of size and weight. And, indeed, if one had been bigger than the other, it would have been no index now, since there was no saying what effect the sickness might have had upon them.

Mary raised her eyes to Deborah's face in mute appeal.

“I cannot tell which is which. O Deborah, can you not help me?”

“I fear me not, Mary. I have long since given up seeking to know which is which. But what matters it? Neither will be the worse for bearing his twin brother’s name. Thou wilt have to settle which thou dost call Edgar and which Edmund, and when thou hast them both with thee always, thou wilt soon cease to confound one with the other. They will grow different as they grow older, never fear.”

She could not understand the frightened look in Mary’s eyes, and put it down to weakness; so she presently had the babies taken away, and sought to enliven her guest with the gossip of the town. But Mary was very silent and abstracted; and when John came in from his discussion with the farmer, she asked to be taken home.

“Thou wilt send back the children soon, Deborah. I have not thanked thee as I should for thy goodness to them,” she said, as she was lifted to the back of the horse.

“Ay, ay, thou shalt have them so soon as thy husband will let thee, but thou art not strong enough yet,” answered Deborah; and then John led Dobbin away through the yard and out upon the bridle-path, and looking tenderly up at his wife, he asked,—

“What ails thee, Mary lass?”

“O John, what shall we do? They have not known to keep the boys separate the one from the other, and when they brought them to me I could not tell which was our son and which our lady’s!”

John uttered a low whistle. He had heard before that Deborah did not know the twins apart, but it had never entered his head that Mary would not distinguish between them when they were brought to her. His face grew grave as he walked along listening to her story; but he was a man of calm temperament and sound common-sense, and after reflection he looked into his wife's troubled face and said,—

“Do not fret, Mary. 'Tis a pity for sure, yet perchance it will not greatly matter. Our lord and lady do not send for the child; indeed, since I have been about once more, Martin has told me that our lady has been grievously ill, and that the leeches all say, if she is to live, she must needs be taken away to some far-distant clime where the frost and snow come not. So they will go thither anon, and return not yet to these shores; and since no word was spoken anent the boy, methinks his parents will leave him still to our care.”

Mary heaved a sigh of momentary relief, but then said, “Yet the day will come when they will want him back, and then—”

“Like enough by then we shall know for a surety which is our son and which the young lord. Think, Mary, my girl, how many in a family take after father or mother, aunt or cousin, so that none can fail to see that the family blood runs in their veins. Our little Jack is a Beetel every inch of him—no mistaking him for my lord's son; and as for little Moll, she is the very image of her mother. As the boys grow up, we shall see soon enow which is the

miller's son and which the lord's. We shall have to put the names to each ere we can be assured; but the worst would be that they would one day have to make exchange again, and very like we shall know so quickly that none other than ourselves will know that we have changed and changed again."

This view of the case was comforting to Mary, and there was a sound sense about it which appealed to her reason. She rode on again in deep thought, and presently looking down at her husband, said,—

"Yet sometimes it is not so. How often have we said that our small Hugh is like to none in the family, so that one would not know him to be a Beetel at all."

"Like enow he takes after some one in thy family, Mary, whom thou perchance hast never seen."

"I have scarce seen any of my kith or kin; even the memory of my father hath grown dim of late years. If it should be so with little Edmund, how then shall we know him for ours?"

"Make not trouble ere it come, wife," answered John with a smile. "We have two lads to rear, and it is the lord's wish that, till he claim his own son, both pass as ours, and both be treated alike. It is scarce likely to be that neither the one nor yet the other will show traces clear to be read of the stock from whence he is sprung. It may even be that when thou hast the two babes home again, and dost sit and watch them at their play, thou wilt learn to know them apart once again. Thy brain is not yet as strong and clear as it is wont to be. As thou dost

get back thy health thou mayest get back other powers too. There is naught for thee to fret about yet, and fretting is bad for thee."

Her husband's tenderness and good sense won the day, and Mary resolved not to fret, but to leave it to time to settle the knotty point of descent in a way which should be satisfactory to all.

She was soon well enough to have all her children back—the two sturdy boys; and little Moll, her veritable image in miniature; and the two babies, whom the elder children received with open arms, and regarded in the light of very precious treasures.

No word came from Lord and Lady Hascombe. All that was known of them was that they had gone beyond the seas into Italy, there to sojourn for a while. Such a journey was out of the question for a young child, and Mary's fears were laid to rest. Little Edgar would remain her care for probably a few years now, and surely before his parents' return the doubt about the boys' identity would be at an end.

But having them back under her care did nothing to solve the puzzle. If she fancied one day that she knew them apart, and put a mark on "the little lord," sure as the next day came something happened to change her opinion, and the mark was transferred to the other boy. At last she gave up the attempt. She knew perfectly which child was which, in the sense of speedily distinguishing between them, for there was none of that extraordinary resemblance which often pertains to real twins; but which of the pair

was her own Edmund, and which Lady Hascombe's Edgar, she could never be sure ; and as she would sit and watch them rolling on the floor in their baby play, a voice in her heart asked the ceaseless question,—

“ Which is which ? Ah me, if I only knew—if I could only tell which is which ! ”

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER TEN YEARS.

THE woods round Hascombe Hall had put on their summer bravery—that peculiar midsummer brilliance when the golden greens of springtide have not yet merged themselves in the sombre uniformity of the later season, though promise has been replaced by fulfilment.

The brown flooring of the grand beech glade that led up to the closed house was dappled with flickering lights and shadows, and the great trunks of the fine old trees shone ruddy in the mellow afternoon sunshine. The deer had been sheltering there during the hot noontide, but they were wandering out now into the greener glades beyond, startled away perhaps by the sound of footsteps; and yet the familiar boyish figures that approached up the long avenue were known to all the wild creatures of the place, and excited no alarm.

The two boys walked with arms entwined, and both wore the habit of the children of the burgher class. Their brown cloth tunics and caps were perfectly plain, and their home-knitted stockings matched in colour. Every detail of their dress was identical, and both had soft golden

curls that clustered their brows and fell to their collars behind. They were of the same height, but one was slightly more robust than his fellow, and the eyes of the slimmer lad often wore a dreamy and far-away look, whilst those of his comrade were bright with keen observation and eager interest in the concrete objects by which he was surrounded.

The features of the boys were not particularly similar, and yet there were many amongst their friends and kinsfolk who had a difficulty in distinguishing between them. Perhaps this was because there was a very strong resemblance in voice, manner, and gesture. From being always together, the lads had developed almost identical traits. What one did the other did; what one said the other echoed; the opinions of the pair were never at variance. No one knew which was the leader—least of all could they have said themselves. To the world at large, who regarded them as “the twins of Hascombe Mill,” this resemblance seemed natural enough; but there was one pair of eyes that observed it with a sort of wonder, and would fain have seen divergence instead of this ever-increasing identity of thought, speech, and manner.

Edgar was the name by which the less robust of the lads was called, and the stouter Edmund would laughingly assert his seniority of a few days. That they were not brothers had never entered into the head of either boy, and indeed it had been wellnigh forgotten by the few who originally knew the secret. There were months when even Mary Beetel herself never gave the matter

a thought. The boys had been hers for ten long years; it seemed likely that they might be hers for ever.

The peculiar bond of love that bound these two together was quite different from the ordinary *camaraderie* of brotherhood. Possibly this resulted in some way from these boys being so much younger than the other children of the mill, who had all of them entered somewhat upon the serious business of life whilst Edgar and Edmund were still quite young. Then, again, the mother gave to them a closeness of attention quite unusual in those days. She recalled a number of the little refinements of her own girlhood, and sought to instil them into the minds and manners of these boys. She early began to teach them such book-learning as she herself was possessed of; and she persuaded her husband to pay a small sum to Father Bartholomew from the priory to instruct them in the art of penmanship and in the rudiments of Latin. When they were a little older they were to be sent daily to Gadhelm for instruction in the free grammar school which had recently been established through the liberality and determination of certain burghers, of whom Michael Beetel was one of the leaders. But so far Mary had rather opposed a too-frequent intercourse with the town for these younger boys. She liked them to wander about nearer at home, and she encouraged them to roam in the park lands that lay around Hascombe Hall, and to get old Martin the bailiff, who now lived in the shut-up house with a few other servants, and kept the place free from damp and decay, to tell them stories of the

place and its owners, till they felt a loving pride in the old house, and knew every inch of it within and without, as nobody except Martin himself could boast of knowing.

Martin and his wife encouraged the visits of the boys, as indeed they made the chiefest break for the old couple in the monotony of their life. The boys were on their way up to the Hall now, with a small present of vegetables and eggs for "Dame Dorcas," as they called her. Perhaps they would take out the old punt on the fish-ponds, and get her some fish, if these would only bite. They had been fishing half the day in the mill-pool, but owing to the heat and glare of sunshine their labours had been vain.

They were talking about this, as boys will talk, promising a better catch in the Hall ponds shortly, when Edgar suddenly stopped short and pointed, and Edmund uttered a quick exclamation of astonishment and dismay.

"It's a soldier and his horse—they've fallen down. But surely they can't both be dead. See, the horse lifts up his head. He has heard our voices. Hasten, Eddie, hasten; perchance we may be in time to help the man."

The boys dashed forward at the top of their speed. From the gaunt, jaded appearance of the poor horse it looked as though he must have been over-ridden, and had at last either put his foot in a hole, or just dropped in his tracks from sheer exhaustion. His rider lay motionless face downwards upon the soft ground beneath the beeches; but as the boys approached, the horse uttered a whinnying sound of welcome, and struggled to his feet.

"Poor beast, good horse," said Edgar, caressing him, and

offering him one of the wheaten rolls from the top of the basket, which Mary Beetel was famed for making. The horse sniffed for a moment, as though undecided, and then began to eat eagerly.

Meantime Edmund was bending over the prostrate figure, gently turning it over. The man was very thin and bronzed, as though with exposure to the suns of other latitudes, and he had the dress and trappings of a man-at-arms, not those of a knight or an esquire. He seemed to have been lately in the wars, for his sword arm was rudely bandaged, and the bandage was stiff with clotted blood. His face was very white beneath its deep coat of tan, but he was living and breathing, as the boy saw at once, and almost immediately he opened his eyes.

Edgar had meantime run down to the bottom of a little dell, and now returned with an iron cup filled with water. They lifted the soldier's head and gave him drink, and when he had drained the cup to the last drop he uttered a sound of satisfaction.

"I give you thanks, good lads, for this timely aid," he said; and the observant Edmund noted at once the refinement of the voice and manner of the speaker. "I had hoped to reach the shelter of the house ere my poor horse should quite refuse to bear me farther, but it seems that we have both been lying here helpless, for the sun was barely up when I entered these woods, and now he looks nigh to setting."

"Were you bound for Hascombe Hall, good sir?" asked Edmund.

“Well, to speak the truth, I was rather bent upon finding one Lord Hascombe’s bailiff, a very honest knave, Martin by name, who showed me kindness once long years ago, and to whom I have certain messages from his lord in foreign parts.”

“You come from Lord Hascombe! Marry, then, you will be right welcome!” cried Edmund eagerly; “for Martin has heard naught from his lord this many a year, save that he is alive and well, and receives his dues in safety.”

The soldier was making shift to get to his feet with the assistance of the boys. He was very stiff and very weak, and his horse was in such sorry plight that he would not attempt to mount him, but laid one hand on the creature’s neck and the other on Edmund’s shoulder, and so they wound their way slowly towards the house by the short cut known to the lads.

The stranger had not breath to walk and talk at the same time, so they knew no more about him and his mission, even when they had helped him over the rough ground and were approaching the Hall, than they did at the outset; but they felt as though on the verge, if not in the midst, of an adventure, and any break in the monotony of their quiet life was welcome.

Edgar ran on in advance to give notice of their approach, and a stout serving-man from the yard was dispatched to bring in the weary horse, whilst Edgar ran through the great open doorway down a long flagged passage, and came straight upon Martin, who was issuing

from his private room, where he had just finished supper.

A few breathless words from the excited boy warned him that some stranger was near—some stranger who purported to have news of Lord Hascombe. The hint alone of such an event was enough to quicken Martin's steps. The bailiff, though now a man of hard on sixty years—a considerable age in those days, when from many causes human life was much shorter in its span than at the present time—was hale and hearty, in the full vigour of his strength. His long strides kept pace with Edgar's fleet steps, and together they emerged into the sunny courtyard, just as the bronzed, weary traveller set foot therein.

Martin hastened forward, cap in hand, for there was something in the aspect of the stranger which inspired respect, though his habiliments and trappings were those of a common man-at-arms, and he rode, as it seemed, unattended and alone. There was no look of recognition in Martin's eyes as he surveyed the face and figure of the approaching guest; but when they met, the traveller looked him straight in the eyes, and spoke some strange words which sounded to the wondering boys like part of some cabalistic spell.

“Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills.”

Martin started violently and threw up his hands in amazement.

“Lord James!” he cried. “Saints preserve us! Lord James Fitzgerald, alone and wounded! What means it, my lord, what means it?”

"It means that I have done it, good Martin, and have come hither for rest and shelter ere I go my way."

"Done what, good my lord?" asked Martin, as he gave his arm to the traveller and led him gently towards the great panelled hall, which ten years previously had seen the joyful meeting between Lord and Lady Hascombe.

"Done what I vowed ten years ago to do!" answered the soldier grimly. "I have slain the slayer of my brothers. Kildare's brethren are avenged!"

"Alack, my lord, and have you joined yourself to that other impostor of whom we have heard tell—one Perkin Warbeck by name, who calls himself King Edward's son, though all men know that that poor lad was done to death in prison by his uncle, King Richard? There have come rumours hither of rising and rebellion in the west. Have you been amongst the insurgents once again?"

By this time Lord James had reached the great hall. Dim and gloomy as it was at most hours of the day, it was unwontedly bright just now, for long shafts of sunlight streamed through a great mullioned window that faced north-west, and lit up the vast place from end to end. The traveller, with a sigh of relief, stretched his weary limbs along a wide oaken settle covered by a thick boar-skin rug, and looked into Martin's troubled face with a smile in his eyes.

"I have, and I have not, good fellow. I will tell thee all the tale in few words. With Henry Tudor I have no quarrel, nor has Kildare, my brother. We have had naught to say to this second pretender, although he sought our

aid, and obtained some help in Ireland from other sources. Yet when I knew that he had come hither, that he had raised insurrection first in the north and then in the west, I knew that my time had come. Upon the battle-field I should meet the murderer of my brothers. I should have my opportunity—and I took it!”

Martin shook his head with a sigh. The hot blood of youth had cooled in his veins. He deplored rashness and a needless running into peril. But Edmund’s eyes glowed with excitement as he heard the tale, and he and Edgar drew near step by step, their faces flushed, their eyes alight.

Lord James looked at the boys, and a flickering smile awoke in his eyes as he did so. It seemed almost as though the rest of his tale were addressed rather to them than to Martin.

“I settled all with Kildare. He could not move himself. If he had done it in person all must have been known, and disaster to our house would have followed. But I have ever been a rover—a rolling stone. My comings and goings mean naught. No man heeds them. Hither I came almost alone. I took the garb of a man-at-arms. I stole forth towards the spot where the insurgent army was advancing. I joined their ranks as a private adventurer. I knew right well that such a rabble rout would achieve nothing, but what did that matter? I was there to slay the man who had dared kill Kildare’s brothers. The rest was naught to me.”

Edmund’s eyes were glowing. He came a step nearer.

“Good my lord, and did you know the man who had done the deed? Did you know him after ten years?”

“Ay, my lad, I knew him when we met upon the field of Blackheath. I knew him by his port and crest, and by the livery of his servants. I knew him, too, by the face, of which I caught one glimpse ere he closed his visor. I had seen that face once as he rode down my brothers and killed them one after the other, he and his men-at-arms. I knew him once again, and the strength of ten was given to me, for then I knew the hour had come when Kildare should kill him, who had dared kill Kildare.”

He set his teeth for a moment, the hot blood mounting to his wan cheek. Edmund and Edgar pressed nearer. It was all breathlessly exciting to them, their first real contact with the outside world—that great seething world which lay beyond the limits of their home and the township to which they belonged.

“I waited my chance. It came at last. With the battle I had no concern; I was there for that one purpose, and that purpose I accomplished. He was strong, he was valorous, as needs must be, else his hands had never done the deed of ten years back. His valour carried him from the ranks of his own men. He was alone and I was alone, and we met face to face and charged with a shock that made our chargers reel. Then we closed and smote back and forth, and for a time I scarce knew whether he might not slay another of Kildare’s brothers, and himself escape, so great was the force of his arm and the power of his blows; but in that my cause was just, and that my

heart was burning within me with a hatred of which he could know nothing, I was able at length to take my good sword in both hands and deal him such a blow as cleft through crest and helm and skull, down to his very shoulders, and he fell dead as a stone at my feet, in that place from which for the moment the tide of battle had rolled, leaving him and me together and alone. The last words he heard ere he left this world were the words I had cried to him ten years before, as his men drove me back from the place where my brothers Thomas and Maurice lay dead—'Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills!'

The boys understood then the meaning of the strange saying, and Edmund's eyes flashed fire.

"Oh, 'twas well done, 'twas bravely done! Would that I might live to do such deeds! If any laid a hand on Edgar I would strike him dead with one blow. I would pursue him to the ends of the earth. I would—"

"Softly, lad, softly," spoke Martin's voice behind, and he laid a hand upon the boy's shoulder. "Thou art talking of matters that thou dost not understand, and such words become not thine age and standing. Get you home, lads, get you home. Lord James must needs rest, and let me see to that wound of his. But tell your good mother and father that one is here who can give us news of our good lord, and perchance Lord James will suffer them to come and see him on the morrow, and hear it from his own lips."

"Who are these lads?" asked Lord James, who had looked with kindly interest upon the pair.

"We call them the 'twins of Hascombe Mill,'" answered Martin, with his eyes full on Lord James's face; and the traveller flashed back a glance that took in both boys and Martin's cautious expression, and he lifted himself upon his elbow to watch the retreating forms.

"The 'twins of Hascombe Mill,'" he repeated, and his eyes looked squarely into Martin's; and when the closing of the door told them that the boys had gone, he added musingly, "Then one of those two lads is my sister's son?"

"Yes," replied Martin slowly. "One of them twain is the heir of the Hascombes, yet his father leaves him to be brought up as a burgher's son. I had not thought how it would be when my lord went hence ten years ago, and laid a charge upon honest John Beutel to rear the child as his own."

"It seemed to him the best and safest plan. I heard from him all about it," said Lord James. "He feared many things if it were known that his infant heir was left behind, and he did not then believe that he would remain so long away from his native land—least of all, if the king took no cognizance of his act of rebellion, as has been the case."

"We have been sorely perplexed to know what has caused our lord to stay away so long. There has been no talk of forfeiting his lands; they have remained his in undisturbed possession. I send him the rents and the dues in the manner he has commanded; but year by year goes by, and he comes not."

“That is the doing of his wife,” said Lord James, a little grimly. “She has no desire to leave the sunny south for the cloudy skies of England.”

“His wife!” quoth Martin, with something of a start. “They sent us word that our sweet lady was dead—that she had only lived a year after she reached the shores of Italy.”

“And that is but too true,” answered Lord James. “I went with them. I remained with them until she died. She was always talking to the very last of getting well and returning home to see her little boy; but it was not to be.”

Lord James heaved a sigh, which Martin echoed; a look of dismay and trouble had clouded his honest face. He began to understand that a new element had entered into the life of the Lord of Hascombe, which might have no small bearing upon the future prospects of the young heir.

But the physical condition of his guest must be next attended to, and Martin curbed his curiosity until he had helped Lord James to the comfortable bed made ready for him, had dressed the ugly sword-cut in his arm, and had seen him partake of the good cheer provided by his wife. The traveller was so far exhausted that he was glad of a space for rest and refreshment. But later in the evening, when Martin would have settled him for the night and gone away, he looked up, and, waking from the light doze into which he had fallen, he asked,—

“Did not Lord Hascombe tell you by letter or message that he had taken to himself a second wife?”

"If he did, the letter or message has never reached me," answered Martin. "I have no knowledge of such a marriage, but perchance it explains many things that have sore puzzled us in the past. Good my lord, can you tell us aught anent the lady?"

"She is an Italian princess," answered Lord James. "That is to say, her father was Italian, though there was English blood in her mother's veins. They have many noblemen in Italy who bear the title of prince, as perchance thou knowest, good Martin. This lady was the young widow of one such prince, and, having no child, was living a solitary life in her castle; and when my sister with her husband came to that place, she showed them great kindness, and at the last she took them into her house, and it was there that Geraldine breathed her last."

Martin looked a little relieved.

"Then she hath a kind heart, and loved our sweet lady?"

"Ay, that is true," answered Lord James quietly; but after a pause he added, "Nevertheless, Martin, kindness of heart can go hand in hand with a very haughty spirit. When I last saw Lord Hascombe, only six months agone, he had not yet had the courage to tell his wife that he had a son in England who was lawful heir to his estates and titles here."

Martin made a little gesture of comprehension.

"Then our new lady has children of her own?"

"Yes, two. There are two fine black-eyed children, and their mother tells the boy of the broad lands in England

that will be his some day ; and her husband listens and says naught, and I think he wellnigh forgets sometimes that he has an elder son."

Martin's face looked grave and anxious.

"Then will my lord come hither again one day, with his princess wife and his black-eyed children?"

"Perchance he may. They speak of it sometimes ; but the lady loves the sunshine of her Italian skies, and she is fearful lest her husband may yet be in the king's disfavour. I told them that there was no fear now, and how that the king had ever shown himself moderate and peaceful and merciful to foes. Then, when I could get speech of Lord Hascombe alone, I made bold to ask him what he was doing for the proper upbringing and tuition of his heir."

"Ay, and what said he?" asked Martin eagerly.

"He started at the sound of the word, and seemed somewhat put about, and begged me to use caution how I spoke such things. Then he said that he scarce knew whether the boy was still living—he knew naught of the matter—but that if he was, he was safe, and in excellent honest keeping, and that none need trouble anent the matter, which he would look into himself when he returned home. I made bold then to ask him if he thought it fair to Geraldine's son and his own that he should be brought up as a miller's son, and at that he changed colour and seemed like to grow angered ; but anon he calmed down, and answered that John and Mary Beetel would have a care to his right and honest upbringing, and that, for the rest, he

could learn the arts of horsemanship and arms with some good master in a short time later on."

"And that was all he thought on?" queried Martin regretfully. "He had no yearnings at heart for his first-born son?"

Lord James made a slight, significant gesture.

"When a man has a new wife and some beautiful children about him, and knows what a storm would be provoked if he showed yearnings for another child, he is cautious how he lets himself think too much of the past. His princess wife loves him with that jealous, vehement love of the daughters of the south, and I misdoubt me he would have an evil time were he to tell her now that he had a son standing in the way of that dark-eyed boy of hers. How it will end, Heaven alone knows; but my message to John and Mary Beetel is, that the secret is still to be preserved, whether or not they may hear rumours that the lord is on his way home."

Martin stroked his chin. He fell into a deep reverie. Lord James was the first to speak.

"Which of those two lads was Lord Hascombe's, and which the miller's son?"

"The one upon whose arm your lordship leaned to reach the house is Edmund Beetel; the lad who ran on to give warning of your approach is Edgar Hascombe."

"And which was it that spoke so eagerly when I told my tale? My eyes were somewhat dim, and I could not well distinguish betwixt the pair."

"That was Edmund, the miller's son. He is the readiest

with a word or a blow, but the other lad lacks not for courage. Where his brother goes thither he follows, and there be many who scarce know the pair apart."

"I would it had been the other way," said Lord James. "There was something in the eagerness and vehemence of that lad which pleased me well. Methought I felt the thrill of kinship as he spoke. The blood of the Kildares runs in the veins of Geraldine's son."

Martin made no response. He was very full of thought as he moved about the room, setting all in order, and watching the eyes of the weary man close in sleep. For his own part, he felt no haste to seek his bed; he had food enough for his mind. He went to the quarters in the outer quadrangle which he occupied with his wife, and there he repeated all that the traveller had told him, even to his last words respecting the two lads.

The old couple looked each other full in the eyes as these words were spoken. They had not thought for years of the doubt as to the identity of the two boys. Mary had told them of her dilemma after the sickness, though she had told none beside. It was Martin and his wife, together with the Beetels themselves, who had, when the boys were about three or four years old, decided that the one who grew up a little more slight and delicate-limbed of the pair must be Edgar, the delicate lady's child; and from that time the boys, instead of being termed Eddie irrespectively, went by the names of Edgar and Edmund, and there had arisen no perplexing doubts since. Edgar seemed the fonder of his books and of the sound of the

lute, his fingers were more skilful at penmanship, and he seemed quicker at learning such small refinements of speech or manner as were impressed upon the pair. This difference, small as it was, had satisfied Mary's heart that they had distinguished aright; and the Martins always observed a certain dreaminess and gentleness about Edgar which recalled their gentle lady to them, and they had come to forget that there was any doubt in the matter.

"A soldier like Lord James would fain find his nephew a man of war," said Martin at length. "But my lord was never of that ilk; and our gentle lady, for all that the blood of the Kildares ran in her veins, was as tender and gentle as a flower. Nay, nay; we need not raise any doubt now. It will but trouble Mary, and serve no good purpose. Moreover, since all the world regards them as the 'twins of the mill,' what matters it which is Edgar and which is Edmund? And Heaven alone knows whether the lad will ever come to his inheritance."

CHAPTER V.

LORD JAMES.

EDMUND was hugely excited. Such a thing had never yet entered into his boyhood's dreams, as that he should make personal acquaintance with a great and mighty warrior, a knight-at-arms, one who had crossed the sea and faced many a peril to slay the slayer of his race. It was not for naught that Mary Beetel had imparted to these two boys the whole slight store of knowledge she herself possessed, nor that Michael Beetel, as a reward for their proficiency in the art of letters, had bestowed upon each of the lads one of those highly-priced and much-venerated volumes printed by Caxton not so many years before. To Edmund had been given "The Book of Feats of Arms and of Chivalry," and to Edgar "A Book of the Noble Histories of King Arthur and of Certain of his Knights;" and their mother possessed the "Golden Legend: a Collection of the Lives of the Saints," together with Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" and "A Book of Divers Ghostly Matters." These books were a simple mine of wealth to the twin brothers. They pored over them during the long winter evenings, lying before the

hearth side by side, with the dancing flame illuminating the thick black lettering of the familiar pages. They took them out into the woods in summer, and enacted there to their own satisfaction and delight the valorous deeds of the knights of old.

Their whole quarrel with fate was that they lived in such peaceful days that no king's sergent-at-arms rode into the market-place, to summon the unwilling burghers from their peaceful occupations, and bid them arm and follow him to the field. They heard stories of times, not long gone by, when no man knew, from day to day and from week to week, what he would next be called upon to do. He might have to leave house and goods, wife and children, at a moment's notice, to follow some great noble, or answer the king's summons, though he went forth to fight in a cause in which his heart was not; and many an honest burgher had so gone forth who had never returned to his home and sorrowing family.

Small wonder was it that the reign of Henry Tudor, which had brought to a close the bloody and disastrous civil wars which had desolated the country, was regarded as the greatest blessing; and he himself, in spite of his reserve and lack of chivalrous qualities, was regarded as a monarch to be upheld and respected. Ten years of peace and settled government had taught the townfolk a lesson they had been quick to appreciate, and small sympathy was there in England for the new pretender to the crown, who had first sought to invade the country from the north, and more lately still was rumoured to have joined the

malcontents of Cornwall, and to be marching straight for London town.

The boys had eagerly asked of their parents and guardians whether there would be another war, evidently full of hope that such might be the case; but the answer they received had checked their open inquiries in this direction, though it had not made them less eager themselves to hear more of the anticipated rebellion, or to hope that if fighting there must be, they might bear a certain share in it.

They rushed now down the leafy glade and through the familiar winding path which led to their home, and dashing into the presence of their mother, they shouted out in a breath,—

“A battle, mother, a battle! There has been a great battle hard by London town! The pretender to the king’s crown has been overthrown, and King Henry has made him prisoner!”

“How now, lads; what mean ye by such tidings?” asked John Beetel, who at that moment came from the mill, together with his eldest son Jack, who was apprenticed to his father’s trade. “Thy Aunt Jane from the town was here but a short while back, and none there had heard the news.”

“But it is sooth none the less,” answered Edmund eagerly. “We have heard it from Lord James, who fought there himself, and slew his foe right valiantly, as he had crossed the sea to do. Oh, would I were a man—would that we were both men—that we could fare

forth and do the like!—What was it he said, Eddie—those strange words which, when Martin heard, he looked like one who sees a ghost, and incontinently cried out, ‘Lord James!’?”

“Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills,” answered Edgar at once; and at the sound of that old adage, which Mary Beetel had often heard from the sister of the Earl of Kildare, the gentle Lady Hascombe, who loved to tell of the prowess of her race, the mother started and turned pale.

“Where heard ye these words?” she asked; and then Edmund burst out with his tale—how they had found in the wood one whom they had taken for a mere man-at-arms, but who had proved to be the brother of the lady of Hascombe Hall; and how he was now there with Martin and Dorcas, and had said that he brought news from Lord Hascombe himself.

This was more exciting to Mary and her husband than the news that a battle had been fought; but Edmund and Edgar had a willing and eager audience to their tale in their elder brothers and sister. Hugh came in from the town, where he was apprenticed to his uncle the master-saddler; and Moll, the bright-haired sister, appeared almost at the same time from the meadow, bearing the milk-pail in her hand; and right eagerly was the story listened to by them all, and many were the questions heaped afterwards upon their gentle mother, as to who Lord James might be, whether she had ever seen him, and what news he was likely to have brought from the absent lord.

This last question meant far more to Mary and her husband than the children could guess. Edgar noted how often her eyes were bent upon his face as he sat at the board, his big grey-blue eyes still deep with the thoughts which had been stirred within him, talking less than Edmund, but ever ready to prompt him if memory of any detail failed. Edgar had a singularly receptive mind and a wonderful memory. What he heard he made his own, and he was thus a master in the art of story-telling, both in his own family and to the boys of the town. Cuthbert Beetel, the lame son of Michael, who had been appointed to the post of schoolmaster to the lately-established free grammar school, was longing for the day when he should have Edgar as his pupil; and even though the boys had not been sent there regularly yet, their uncle taught them many things as he came and went, and now and again would bring a book that he could lend the boys for a while, and then Edgar would bury himself in it, and scarce have thought or word for aught else till he had read from cover to cover, when he would relate to mother or brothers or sister the whole contents, almost as they were set down by the writer.

"That boy should be a monk or a priest," Father Bartholomew would oftentimes say to his mother and to the prior; but Mary Beetel would shake her head and answer that that was not the wish of his father; and sometimes the blood would mantle her cheek as she reflected on the real future of the boy, who showed such early promise. He would be well fitted to shine in a loftier sphere than

any of which he yet dreamed. His delight in tales of knightly prowess would fit him to play a knightly part when the right time came.

John and Mary Beutel went early to the Hall upon the morrow, bidding the boys, who would fain have accompanied them, remain behind, unless their company should be desired by Martin or Lord James. So they spent their morning fishing in the stream, anxious to have a dish of trout to take with them for the benefit of the guest. And they had good success that day, despite their own restless excitement, though they could talk of nothing but the wounded knight, as they called him, and whether or not they would be permitted to visit him that day.

When their parents returned, there was a look in the mother's eyes which spoke of recent tears; and as Edgar ran up lovingly to ask what was amiss, she put her arms about him and strained him so closely to her breast that he looked up wonderingly into her face, and asked,—

“What ails thee, sweet mother?”

She kissed him again passionately, many times over.

“I have been hearing sad news, my little son. Lord James, as thou dost know, is brother to our sweet lady here, who died in foreign parts. He has been telling me of her, and her last words and charges. And now our good lord has taken another wife in Italy, and perchance he may bring her one day here. But it will not be to us the same. She is not of English blood, and she will not love us as our former lady did. I cannot but weep to think of her, cut off in her youthful prime.”

She held Edgar close to her, and the tears fell from her eyes upon his upturned face.

He did not understand her emotion, but he was a loving and gentle boy, and set himself to comfort her by tender words and caresses, till Edmund came dashing up in great excitement.

“Eddie, father says we are to go to the Hall. Lord James has asked for us. He would have us with him to while away the time when he must needs lie still and nurse his wound. Let us take our fish and be gone quickly. What tales he will tell us! What things he will show us! Hasten, hasten, Eddie; let us be gone!”

“Thou wilt not weep more, mother mine?” said Edgar, as she released him from her embrace and smiled at Edmund’s eagerness; and Mary promised tenderly, and watched the elastic steps of the pair as they disappeared up the wooded path behind the house.

“Methinks he will be our boy to the end of the chapter,” said John, coming up behind her; and she looked into his face wistfully as she made reply,—

“I could wish indeed that it might be so, save that it would be an injustice to the boy. Heaven has made him the son of a noble, and not of a burgher citizen.”

“Yet perchance the lowlier lot is the happier ofttimes,” said John. “Methinks that Edgar has not much of the fighting stuff in him. He is like his gentle mother—only, Heaven be praised, he is strong and healthy, and will, if it be God’s will, grow to man’s estate, hardy and full of promise. But what his father’s will towards him may be,

I cannot guess. It is a sore thing when a man hides such a truth from his wife. I only marvel that the princess had not heard it from our lady herself ere she died."

Meantime the boys were betaking themselves as fast as their legs could carry them up to the Hall; and when they had arrived, and had given their basket of trout to Dame Dorcas to be cooked for the patient's dinner, they were shown by Martin into the huge, vault-like room where Lord James lay, and heard a voice from the big canopied bed bidding them welcome.

Lord James was quite ready to be amused by his guests, though he was so stiff and bruised and weary, and his wounded arm was sufficiently painful that he was glad to lie quiet in the comfortable bed in this great airy room, and get through the long summer's day as best he could in idleness and rest. His keen eyes fixed themselves steadily first on one boy and then on the other, and he said at length, turning to Edgar,—

"Is it thou who art called Edgar?"

"Yes," answered the boy, "though there be some that know us but imperfectly apart, and some who call us both Eddie, fearing to make a mistake."

"You are like, yet not alike," said Lord James, his eyes turning from one face to the other. "Now tell me, boys, what ye do here in this place. I would know what life is like for you. Know ye aught of any knightly exercises? Can ye make shift to wield a sword, or mount a horse, or tilt with spear as in the tourneys?"

Edmund's cheek flushed and his eyes glowed. The very question seemed to bespeak glorious possibilities.

"Would that we had been taught such knightly exercises!" he cried, with his whole soul in his eyes; "but, alas, we have no skill save with the quarter-staff and with bows and arrows. We meet with the lads of the town on holiday and at fair time, and we make mimic battle in the meadow, and the townsmen award prizes for those who shall show themselves most skilful and valiant. We are suffered each to carry a knife in our belt, but we may not draw it save in self-defence, and never have Eddie or I had cause to use ours. We have some skill at closh, and half-bowl, and club-ball, but of sword-play know we naught, save that we seek to thrust and parry with staves, when we be in the wood together, and read of the gallant feats of arms, and seek to act them over to ourselves. But men think more of the arts of peace than the arts of war in these days; and when they speak of the times of our fathers, when there was strife in the land, they say, 'God preserve us from the like!' But for my part I would fain see something of the strife of arms."

This was an answer after Lord James's heart, and perhaps it marked an era in the lives of the boys of which they knew nothing themselves at the time. The young soldier of fortune looked from Edmund's face to Edgar's, and asked if he too shared his brother's ambitions.

The answer, if spoken more quietly, was not less eager and sincere. The faces of both boys were full of eager anticipation, and in another minute they were clattering

downstairs with whoops of joy to fetch up from the armoury below certain weapons which Lord James minutely described to them, for he had promised them a lesson in the knightly art of fence.

That morning was like the opening of fresh gates of knowledge and power. Even Martin caught the infection of excitement, and came to look on and show the boys many of the thrusts and parries which Lord James directed them to practise, the wounded man sometimes raising himself up on his bed in his interest and eagerness, and seeking to illustrate his words by appropriate gesture.

Martin, like most other elderly men of his day, had carried arms in former years, and had been present in skirmishes, if not in actual battles. He was a fairly expert swordsman, and it seemed to him a right and fitting thing that young Edgar should be taught the arts of attack and defence, even though he might know no reason for it beyond the passing joy of the hour, and he thought his foster-brother should share the same enjoyments.

Between the bouts of mimic fighting, the boys would sit breathless whilst the young lord told them of wild adventures of his own and others in Ireland, or plunged into the region of stirring romance, and almost raised the hair of his listeners' heads by the narration of some splendid feats of chivalry, or some awful story of mystery and magic.

This day was the beginning of a new epoch in the life of the boys. Every day found them at the Hall;

every day saw Lord James stronger than the last, better able to carry on his course of instruction, more willing and eager to give up his time and energy to the training of the two boys in martial exercises.

Truth to tell, the hot-headed young Irish noble was glad enough of this period of peace and quiet at Hascombe Hall. He had embroiled himself in many quarrels with his neighbours at home ; he had impoverished himself by reckless expenditure, and by travel in foreign lands. He was so impulsive, and so well loved fighting for its own sake, that he was ready to take up any man's quarrel and make it his own ; and of late he had been several times wounded, and sometimes felt that his strength was not quite what it had been, although he was still not quite thirty years old.

Thus, now that chance had brought him hither to this abode of rest, it seemed a good thing to him to remain awhile, recover his health, give his foes time to forget their animosities, and let his rents accumulate without being for ever forestalled.

In the house of the brother-in-law he was safe. Martin made him comfortable enough ; for the soldier of fortune had been used to roughing it in all kinds of places ; and there were the boys to amuse and interest him.

One of these boys, moreover, was his sister's son. He was kinsman to Kildare, and it went against Lord James that a nephew of his should grow up ignorant of the arts of knightly warfare and horsemanship, which seemed to him as the very breath of life.

One of these days Lord Hascombe would return ; and Lord James sometimes set his teeth and whispered to himself that if he did not do his sister's son justice, he himself " would know the reason why." True, by that time he might be at the ends of the earth, unable to interfere or protest. But there was no knowing ; he might be close at hand ; and in any case, the more brave and knightly and skilful the father found his son, the more ready would he be to acknowledge him as his heir.

The boys never troubled themselves as to the motives of this young lord, who was already their idol and pattern in all things. It was happiness enough for them that they saw him daily ; that he never seemed to weary of talking to them, instructing them, and by precept and example instilling into them that chivalrous lore for which they were athirst, and those feats of skill and strength of which they had read, and the exercise of which was their greatest ambition.

They were apt pupils both of them ; and though Edmund, as was ever the way, took the lead in exercises requiring strength of arm and steadiness of eyes, yet Edgar was little behind him, and he would sometimes show greater proficiency where quickness and dexterity were required. Each day saw them make progress in their new studies ; and when not with Lord James himself, they were constantly practising the things he had taught, so that he was himself astonished at the progress made.

His own horse, which quickly recovered the fatigues of the journey, was brought into requisition every day, and

both the boys learned quickly how to ride with skill and boldness. There was an old charger of Lord Hascombe's running wild in the park, and Martin presently caught the creature, and Lord James quickly overcame his first reluctance to obey rein and spur, and reduced him to his old obedience and steadiness.

And now even more exciting sports began for the boys. A pole was set up in the meadow, from which a sand-bag was suspended, and the boys had their first lesson in tilting. All sorts of variations of this exercise were made; and Lord James, after showing them what they had to do, and how they were to do it, would stand by directing, upraising, or applauding, whilst the boys rode round and round, and endeavoured with more or less skill and success to emulate his trained and practised movements.

Every kind of weapon and trapping was to be had from the armoury; and the boys, with visors over their faces, were taught how to meet each other in a charge, and to unhorse an enemy in battle. They suffered this ignominy themselves many times in turn from Lord James before they began to understand the trick of it, after which they would, with blunted lances, ride at each other and fight a goodly battle, in which Edgar generally, but sometimes Edmund, would be toppled from his charger, to the great satisfaction of their instructor, who set the example of making light of blows and bruises, and told them that every knight had his scars to show, as every young esquire had his bruises and cuts.

One day, when Edgar was really very stiff from the

previous day's practice, and even Edmund pleaded guilty to a certain amount of fatigue, Lord James proposed that they should take him into the town for a change, and show him the sights of the place. Although he had been a month at the Hall by now, he had never yet left its precincts. Weakness, with a touch every few days of a sort of ague, caught in foreign parts, and recurring when his strength had been overtaxed, kept him more disposed for idleness than exertion; and his amusement and exercise had been the training of the two boys. He liked to hear of the town life and the interests of the citizens, and he was often amused at the eagerness with which the boys outpoured stories of the aggression of the prior, the meanness of some of the burghers in evading the taxes by moving outside the city walls, or renting a house on church land, and getting the prior to fight their battles; or perhaps it would be that some citizen had played false, and failed to take his turn in the nightly watch kept in the streets, or had turned tail and run away upon the first threatening word addressed him by some band of evil-doers marauding in the streets.

The boys were delighted by the suggestion, for they knew that there was much curiosity amongst their friends and kinsfolk about this same Lord James, and the interest he was taking in the "twins of the mill." They had spoken of him to their comrades and friends, and some had envied, whilst some had jeered at them. But to lead him into the town and show him to all was the ambition of their hearts; and very gaily did they take their way down the

long glades and by the woodland paths, showing Lord James the place where the prior always sought to build a dam, and so divert the course of the stream from their father's mill to his own, just in the fork where a small offshoot from the main stream branched away and slipped in a steeper and more direct channel to the prior's mill.

"But our good lord has ever been stanch, and will have none of such trickery," cried Edmund hotly, "though my father says that many another would have been won over by the bribes and the threats that have been offered."

The little town of Gadhelm was defended, like most of its kind, with a wall and with a ditch, and it was entered by four gates. Over two out of the four gates was an object that was familiar enough in those days, but grim to modern eyes—a gallows; and it might even be a human corpse dangling therefrom, or hung in chains, that creaked ominously in the wind as the grisly burden swayed to and fro.

"Yon is the town gallows," said Edmund, pointing to it, "and the prior hath another at the East Gate, which belongs to him. Once on a time there was a third over the West Gate, for the lords of Hascombe; but that has been taken away this long while now. Our present lord was mild and merciful, and put no man to death, but sent all defaulters to be tried by the mayor and burgesses, as is indeed the justest way."

Entering the town, they found themselves in a narrow roadway that was not paved, of course, and in which a

good deal of garbage and refuse lay about rotting in the hot sunshine. Sundry pigs and dogs prowled the streets at will, and acted fairly efficiently as scavengers. But the foot passenger had to pick his way somewhat carefully over the heaps of refuse thrown out from the houses or workshops, though this throwing out of ill-smelling stuff was seldom complained of or interfered with unless the path became absolutely choked and impassable—a matter of not very infrequent occurrence in busy places.

Most of the main streets converged upon the market-place of the township, a large open space, where booths and stalls were erected and rented by burgesses and country-folk for the display of their goods, and where on market days there was much hustling and jostling and some little brawling and disputing, though the city authorities kept a pretty sharp lookout, and any form of cheating was instantly reported, and the offender brought to justice of a more or less summary kind.

The Guild Hall, a structure latterly rebuilt in Gadhelm, was of really rather fine proportions, and was ornamented by some oaken work and great cross beams, all of which were more or less richly carved. It had a flight of wide stone steps leading up to it, and round it stood several houses that for the period were very solidly built. These belonged to the leading burghers of the town, and the boys pointed out one or two of the best as being the homes of their relations.

But before they had satisfied the curiosity of Lord James as to their hall and other buildings, one of which

was the school-house, the sound of a clamour within the hall made itself heard, and immediately there was a rush of persons from the building, some shouting, some laughing, some shaking threatening fists, and all looking behind them in one direction towards certain of the town officers, who presently appeared leading a prisoner forth, upon whom some sentence had plainly just been passed.

"'Tis Wild Will!" cried Edmund, as he saw the tangled head and fierce eyes of the prisoner. "So they have caught him at last."

"Who is he?" asked Lord James. "In sooth he looks a villanous rascal."

"So they call him; but he knows more about the wild creatures of the wood—the birds, the beasts, the creeping things—than any other in the land, methinks. Mother likes not for us to talk with him; but when we meet him in the woods we needs must, he has so many things to tell us. I wonder what they will do to him. There is Peter! Catch him, Eddie! He will surely know."

Peter knew all about it, having been present at the trial, by favour of his uncle, the mayor, to whom he was apprenticed.

"Marry, it is for theft he was brought up—caught in the very act, with two fat capons of our good Aunt Deborah's in his bag, and some other chattels as well. What will they do with him? Why, take him to the East Gate, and nail his ear to the gate-post; then they will give him a knife, and if he will he can cut off his ear and so free himself, and if he like not he may just stay there till he perish."

In an age of summary justice and barbarous punishments, none thought of being horrified by such a sentence ; but Edgar and Edmund exchanged pitying glances, for they had a secret liking for Wild Will, and they deplored his fate and his consequent sufferings, even though by the law of the land he had merited punishment for many transgressions.

The crowd moved away to see the thing done, but Lord James had no curiosity to see a malefactor nailed by the ear. Moreover, the mayor had risen now, for this was the last of the cases brought before him ; and seeing the stranger with his nephews on either side, he came forward, scarlet robe and all, and addressed him in friendly fashion, inviting him afterwards to his house to partake of the mid-day meal.

Lord James accepted the invitation frankly enough. Despite the hard-and-fast lines dividing class from class, the burghers were beginning to take a place in the polity of the realm undreamed of a few years earlier, and needy noblemen would even seek an alliance sometimes with the richer burghers, by marrying their portionless daughters to the well-dowered sons of the people.

Besides, Lord James had roughed it in too many strange places to be squeamish as to his company, and he relished good cheer when it was to be had so easily.

But the lads did not follow him into their uncle's house. A glance between them had been enough to warn them of a common purpose. It scarcely needed the whisper that

passed Edmund's lips, cautiously, as they edged away unheeded,—

“All the town will go dine now. They will leave poor Will fastened up by the ear. Let us make our way cautiously to the gate and watch our chance. We may yet make shift to release him with a whole ear on his head.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE WITCH'S SON.

THE boys slipped away unheeded, for general interest in their soldier-like companion had now been aroused, and the citizens forgot the criminal and the court in the eager examination of Lord James Fitzgerald, of whose presence at Hascombe Hall most of them had heard.

Edmund and Edgar dashed away down a side street towards the spot where the pillory stood, near to the East Gate of the town—a gate through which little traffic now passed, owing to the very bad state of the neighbouring road, and the proximity of the marsh just beyond the wall on this side. There was an open ring close by, where bull and bear baiting were often carried on, and where criminals were exposed to various more or less savage punishments. Up till a short time back the pillory had stood in the market-place, but with the thriving state of the trade in the town the citizens had found it inconvenient, and it had been removed to the open space by the East Gate, where it did not interfere with the coming and going of men and beasts on market or other days.

"We shall want a tool to help release him," said Edgar, suddenly stopping short, "and we have naught but the knives in our belts."

"True," answered Edmund, stopping too and looking about him; and after a moment's pause he added, "I will run into the shop of Master Mason, the lorimer, where Peter works. It will go hard if I lay not hands upon some tool that will serve our purpose."

"If Peter sees thee he will tell," remarked Edgar, who knew that his cousin Peter Beetel was not famed for discretion or reserve; but Edmund only laughed and shook his fist.

"I will give him somewhat to remember it by, an he does," he replied, and darted away in the direction of the thoroughfare where the shops of the lorimers were mainly to be found.

The lorimers were the assistants to the saddlers in those days, being the ironsmiths and coppersmiths who made the metal work for the trappings and harness of the horses; and as Peter's father was the most notable master-saddler of the district, he had apprenticed one of his sons to his neighbour, the master-lorimer, that he might learn that branch of the craft.

In a short time Edmund came running back with the requisite tool in his hand. By this time the streets were almost empty. The general dinner hour of citizens and servants had come. The rabble rout that had poured out to see the punishment of the thief was returning homewards, their curiosity being now satisfied. The officers

had only remained to do their stern work. It was no business of theirs to watch beside their victim. Indeed, it was supposed that he would presently find courage to hack off his ear, and so make his escape ; but from that day forth he would be a marked man, and the brand of felon would be writ large upon him.

When the two boys reached the place of punishment hard by the East Gate of the town, there was nothing but an idle rabble of town boys gathered round the upright post to which the hapless prisoner was nailed by the ear. These boys dared not go very near to him, for in his hand he held the sharp knife that had been given to him wherewith to effect his release, and with it he made fierce and desperate lunges at any who came nigh him, his wild eyes gleaming the while, with the fierce glare of a trapped creature or a wild beast at bay.

But the boys were not to be balked of their mischievous will, and were dancing and grimacing, and shouting opprobrious epithets at him ; nor did they content themselves with this, for they took up mud and stones from the streets and flung them at him, so that his face was black with filth, and the blood trickled from many small cuts and bruises.

This was a sight that stirred the latent chivalry within the souls of the twins. It was not for nothing that their mother had taught them lessons of love and mercy towards all wild things and helpless creatures, or that they had pored over the stories of the knights who went forth to fight the battle of the weak against the strong. The man

before them might have been never so wicked : that was no excuse for him to be treated thus, and insulted and abused in his hour of helpless agony. The fire that glowed in Edmund's eyes was one of righteous indignation, whilst Edgar's overflowed with pity.

“ Out upon you for a pack of scurvy knaves ! ” shouted Edmund, springing forward and dealing sounding blows right and left at the hooting boys, who were all of a class much inferior to his own. The citizens' sons had returned home to dinner. These boys were of the rabble of the town, the sons of the poorer artisans and labourers, who lived in the mud hovels which still disfigured the rising townships of the day, and who were only a few degrees removed in intelligence from the beasts of the field which some of them tended.

“ Shame on you for striking where there can be no defence ! ” cried Edgar. “ Cowards all of you ! Go to— get you hence ! We will not suffer such outrage ! ”

“ 'Tis only Wild Will the witch's son ! ” shouted the boys, who withdrew themselves to a little distance, in sudden alarm at Edmund's vigorous onslaught, but strove to vindicate the righteousness of their cause. “ 'Tis Will the thief—him as his mother sets on her broomstick and carries from place to place, so as none can ever lay hands on him. It were a sin and a shame not to pelt him well now.”

This argument, in many uncouth and almost unintelligible forms, was shouted from one and another ; but Edmund and Edgar turned a deaf ear to all such reasoning.

“Get gone, ye varlets!” shouted Edmund, drawing the knife from his belt, and making a lunge in the direction of the cowering group.

That was quite enough for them. They held the sons of the citizens in considerable awe. In especial was the name of Beetel respected and esteemed, for the office of mayor was more often than not held by one of the family or some relation, and they ranked high in the town polity.

The boys took to their heels without further ado. Their sport was evidently spoiled for the present, but they promised themselves the entertainment of coming back later, and watching whilst the prisoner, goaded by the pangs of hunger and thirst, should effect his release in the prescribed fashion. That the grandsons of the respected Michael Beetel had come with the intent to liberate a common felon, sentenced by their own uncle that very day, never entered into their thoughts.

At last all spectators had vanished. The boys cast sharp glances hither and thither, and Edmund bade his brother keep a vigilant eye upon all sides. He himself advanced towards the culprit, whose glance had changed from one of fierce hatred and desperation to a sort of appealing entreaty, such as one sees sometimes in the eyes of a suffering animal.

“Now, Will,” said Edmund, “thou hast been a foolish fellow, and hast fallen into trouble, as we have always told thee thou wouldst, if thou didst not mend thy ways; but thou shalt have another chance of turning honest man. We will set thee free from this trouble into which thou

hast fallen, but beware for the future how thou meddlest in other folk's matters. If they catch thee at thy tricks another time, it may be that the town gallows, and not the pillory, may be thy fate, and then it is nothing we can do to save thee."

Whilst he was speaking he had climbed up to the little platform where the prisoner stood exposed, and was working at the big nail which fastened his ear to the post. It had been firmly driven in, and that by an experienced hand; but by patience and perseverance Edmund succeeded in loosening it, and finally drew it out with an exclamation of satisfaction.

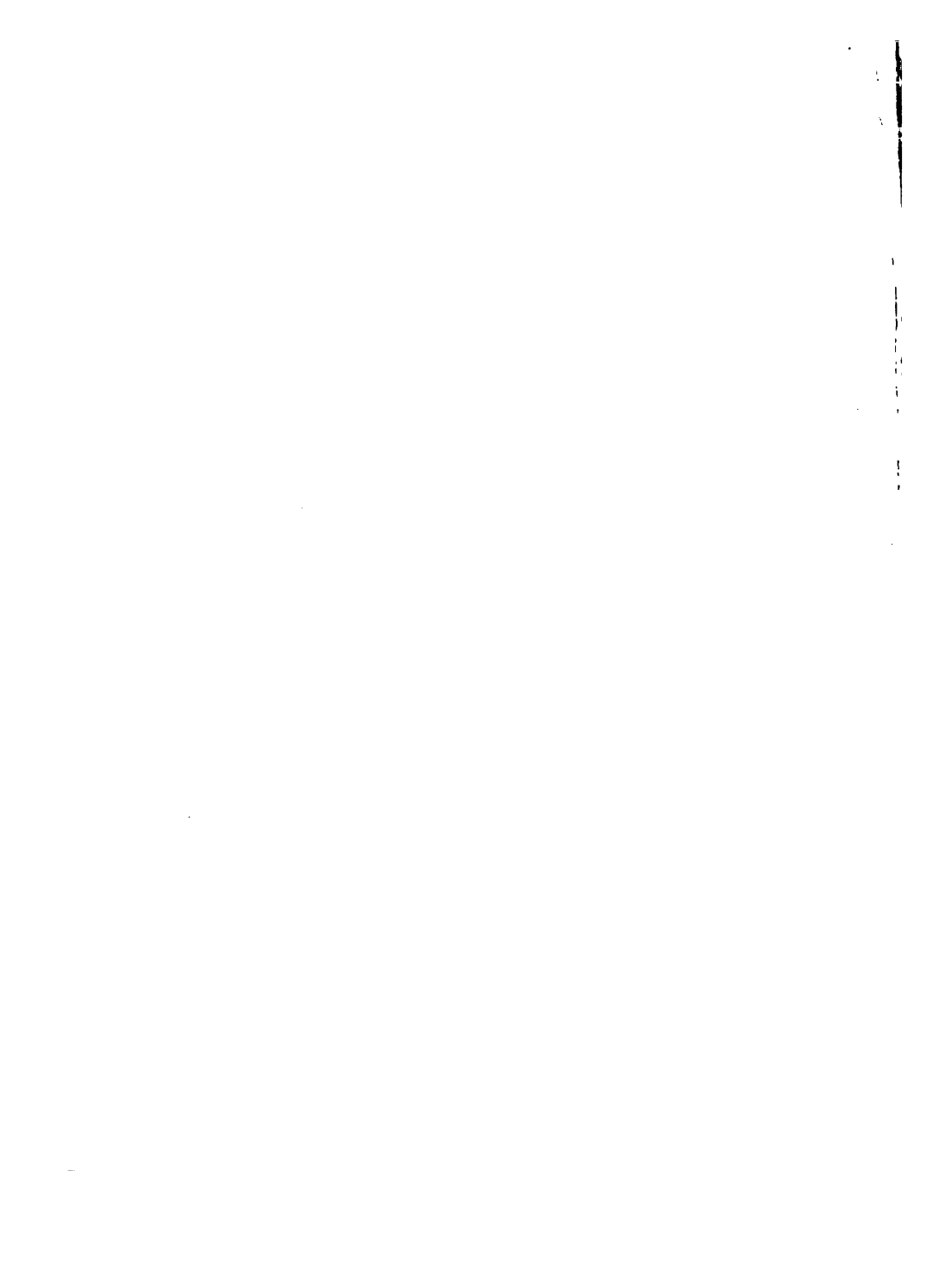
Will stood the infliction of the pain with stoical fortitude, and when he was free he dropped upon his knees, and would have covered the hands and feet of his benefactors with kisses, but they bade him stand up and lose no time.

"Come, we must not delay; we must to the woods and hide thee there till the hue-and-cry be over. Thy mother's hut will be no safe place for thee yet. Come, we will go to the little cave beside the stream; there thou canst wash off this mud and bathe thy wounds, and we will beg some food at our uncle's farm and bring it to thee. Come, Will, come."

The man was plainly too dazed to be left to his own devices. The boys who had effected his rescue must needs see him into some safe hiding-place. Wild Will was one of those strange beings in whom cunning and simplicity are strangely blended. The fact that he was the son of



"He was working at the big nail which fastened his ear to the post."



an old woman, who went by the name of the Witch of Hascombe, had always set him apart from others, and he had certainly some mental deficiency which would have made him a solitary creature under any circumstances.

Roaming the woods was his great and chief delight, but he had an invincible tendency towards making his own anything that he saw and coveted, whether it could be of any use to him or not, and to whomsoever it belonged. It was the covetous instinct of the magpie or the jackdaw. He would steal for the pleasure of the act, hiding his spoil in some hole or crevice, and perhaps never visiting it again. Out of sight was out of mind with him ; but his peculiarity and his exceeding cunning and stealthiness had made him somewhat of a terror in the neighbourhood. Nobody could guess what he would fancy next ; and had he been fully possessed of his faculties, his sentence to-day, now that for once he had been caught red-handed, would probably have been far more severe than had been the case.

It was in the woods that he had made the acquaintance of the Hascombe twins, and his knowledge of the habits of the wild creatures there had been a bond drawing them close together. So now, having effected his release, the boys were resolved to carry the adventure through, and hastily dragged him out through the gate and along the swampy tract beyond, where they were safe from any encounter, till the shelter of the woods was reached at last, and they were able to breathe more freely.

Meantime Lord James, at the table of Thomas Beetel, the mayor of the year, and the master-saddler of the town

in his private capacity, was making himself very popular by his stories of adventure and peril, and by the news he brought of the lord of the manor—the young Lord Hascombe, as he had been in bygone days, though now he was growing to be a man in middle life, as age was then accounted.

The news of his marriage with a lady of foreign birth caused considerable interest and comment. It explained his absence from England better than anything else had done; but the citizens of Gadhelm could not understand how any one owning a fair mansion and broad lands in merry England should care to remain year after year in benighted foreign parts. Lord James laughed a little at this way of stating the case, but remarked that Lord Hascombe and his lady frequently spoke of the probability of their return to England before many more years had passed. This news excited a considerable amount of interest, and the traveller was asked for a description of the charms of the new Lady Hascombe, which he gave with a true Irish eloquence. But Michael and his wife, who were present at the table, exchanged meaning glances. It was plain that they wondered how the haughty and handsome Italian princess would appreciate an heir to these fair lands who was not her own son.

But on this point none spoke. The worthy couple had preserved their son John's secret as scrupulously as he had preserved it himself. None knew exactly why it was that Lord Hascombe had laid that command upon them, but it was theirs not to question, but to obey, and not even to

Lord James, the uncle of Edgar Hascombe, did they betray any knowledge of a situation which was to be concealed from the world.

In the midst of this talk, Peter, the second son of the master of the house, came running in, open-mouthed with news.

"May it please you, good my father, and you gentlemen, Master Mason has sent me with the news that Wild Will the thief has been set at liberty by hands other than his own, and has escaped beyond the city walls!"

"Devil take him and all like him!" ejaculated the mayor, half angry, half relieved by the news; for he had a feeling that Will was not wholly responsible for his misdeeds, and that the punishment had been somewhat severe for one in his condition, though in his capacity of overseer of the public weal he could not well have made it milder.

"How did he get loose?" asked another of the burgesses, who, having suffered from Will's depredations, was not best pleased with the news; "and how is it known that he was loosed by other hands? If any saw such an act, why was it not stopped?"

"None did see it, good sir," answered Peter; "but he has got clean away, and his ear hath not been left behind, nor are there fresh blood-marks upon post or ground. Somebody must needs have released him. They are all saying so, though they say, too, that Wild Will hath not a friend in the world."

"'Tis his old mother that hath come on her broomstick

and carried him off behind her!" cried the aggrieved citizen angrily. "I would that she had been burned as a witch long years ago, in our former Lord Hascombe's time. 'Twas not his fault that she was not. A murrain upon those who stopped judgment!" and he cast rather an angry look upon old Michael Beetel.

"His mother could never make shift to free him," answered the old man calmly. "She is bent double with age and infirmity, and hath not strength or stature for such a task."

"Poof! such as she need neither strength nor stature; they have a host of imps from the pit to do their behests. If I had my way, we would rid the world of such a pestilent hag and her son, and make one burning of it. It may be he hath his own familiar to do his will, and hath gotten himself released without his mother's aid."

Peter was all this time shifting from foot to foot, and looking brimful of importance and excitement. He had the air of one who could reveal vast stores of information if only he could get the chance; but in the good old days mere lads and apprentices were not suffered to join in the talk of their elders without being invited, not even though they might be sons of the house. The delivery of his message was one thing; the expression of any private opinions of his own another. But his father, noting his eagerness, turned and asked him if he knew anything more than he had said.

"Marry, good my father, I cannot say that I know; and yet methinks I could make a shrewd guess an I tried."

"What then is thy guess?" asked several persons, who knew that Peter was a sharp-eyed lad, full of curiosity and observation, and that, although by no means of a bad disposition, he was fond of the importance which his shrewdness sometimes won him, when he had solved problems that had puzzled wiser heads than his own.

"Methinks that my cousins Edmund and Edgar have been at the bottom of this. They have a liking for Wild Will, and for that beldam his mother, the witch. And it was only a short while back that Edmund came cautiously into the shop whilst folks were at dinner, and possessed himself of a strong pair of pincers, such as we use for drawing out nails and such like tasks, and slipped it beneath his tunic, and darted forth again, thinking none had seen him. But I was setting straight the inner shop ere I went to my dinner, and I saw him. And now neither he nor Edgar, nor yet Wild Will, can be seen in all the town."

Lord James broke into a laugh. It seemed a likely enough explanation to him. The boys had spoken of Wild Will as though they had a liking for him, and he could well understand that they would regard such a release as belonging to that code of knightly honour which they had been studying might and main. To succour the needy and oppressed was one of the aims of chivalry, and although the true days of chivalry might be past, the spirit would live throughout all generations in the hearts of men.

"And," continued Peter, who delighted in the attention which his words were receiving, "there be some of the

town varlets of the baser class who testify that my cousins came to the pillory, and drove them away as they were pelting and hooting the prisoner; and though none stayed to see what they did afterwards, there is little doubt by whose hands he was set free."

"Well, we are quit of the knave for the time," said Thomas the mayor, a little vexed by the explanation he had himself invited. "He will not dare show his face within the town walls for many a day to come; and for the rest, he would soon have cut himself free if somebody had not come to his aid."

Several citizens, however, grumbled a good deal, and the action of Edmund and Edgar was commented upon freely.

"If the lads were brought up as other lads be—sent to school to be taught, and well cudgelled when they disobeyed—they would not be so daring and defiant. But John and Mary Beetel have always spoiled their twins. They had best have a care to it," and the speakers cast glances both at old Michael and his son.

Perhaps the charge was not altogether without shadow of foundation. Edgar and Edmund Hascombe had not been brought up quite like other boys of their supposed status.

"I will speak to my son anent this same matter," said Michael, who had been grave and thoughtful ever since hearing the story of Lord Hascombe's second marriage.

Meantime Lord James had taken himself away, with a brief farewell to his hosts. He wanted to find the truant lads and hear the truth of the tale; and he had a shrewd notion that he would be able to discover their

whereabouts, though others might fail; for he had been introduced to all their favourite haunts during the days they had spent together, and he guessed that they would hide Will in one of those secret lurking-places which had been shown or eloquently described to him.

And, in truth, he visited at once the little natural cave hollowed out almost beneath a miniature cascade that leaped from a rocky crag into a basin beneath. It was in the heart of a tangle of woodland, where no path was, save the narrow track the feet of the boys had trod in their comings and goings.

There was a brief cry and scuffle as he pushed aside the bush of golden broom that guarded the entrance, and came upon the three fugitives discussing together some excellent viands that had been begged by Edgar from his good aunt Deborah Pastern, with whom he was a prime favourite. But when the boys saw who it was that had invaded their retreat, they welcomed him with a shout of delight. Somehow it never occurred to them to doubt that Lord James could be anything but a friend.

Poor Will looked in somewhat less sorry plight than a short time back; but the fright and the pain and the horror of the brief imprisonment he had suffered, prior to being brought up for trial, had given his face a scared and hunted look, and he could not be prevailed upon to do aught but cower in a dark corner and gaze at the stranger with a piteous look of dumb appeal in his eyes.

It seemed kinder at the last to leave him to sleep off his terror and exhaustion on a heap of dried fern which lay in

the back of the cave; and the boys promised that they would tell his mother where he was, that she might bring him food during the time that it would be prudent for him to keep in hiding from the possibility of pursuit.

Lord James, as he went away with the boys, asked them of the old woman who had been called the Witch of Hascombe.

"Witch or no witch, she has a right to live," said Edgar, "and that is all she asks. And folks are glad enough to come to her for her herb simples, that cure fevers when the leeches only bleed and bleed till there is no blood left to take, and the patient dies for lack of it. It was she who taught our mother much of the skill she has; but because she lives alone, and is bent and withered and old, men must needs dub her witch."

"But yet, by what I heard, she was in peril of death by fire long years ago, when she could neither have been old nor withered. How, then, was that?"

"That was the deed of the bad Lord Hascombe!" cried Edmund with a flash in his eyes. "Our grandam has told us the story oft, and sometimes our father will tell it, if we coax him, as we sit over the fire cracking nuts on All Hallow Eve. It was he and our grandfather who saved her out of his hand; and she loves the name and race of Beetel as much as she hates that of Hascombe."

"Was your lord's father, then, so bad a man as to get that name?" asked Lord James.

Edmund coloured slightly as he answered,—

"Perchance I should not have spoken thus. Our father

and mother never call him so ; but our grandam said that in his youth he was both wild and cruel, and that there were folks who dubbed him the bad earl. As for poor Mother Bunch, as we call her, Edgar and I, she was young and handsome in those days ; and Lord Hascombe made much of her, and called her a comely wench, and what not. But there broke out a sickness amongst his kine, and even some of his servants sickened ; and they one and all declared that she had poisoned them or overlooked them. So they brought her up before him when he sat in his judgment court, and she was charged as a witch, and he declared that the charge was proven by many witnesses, and that she should be burned. Yet our grandam says that it was a foul and a false charge, and that he wanted her death because she would have none of his kisses and fair words, but sent him away with some true words about himself which he never forgave."

"And how escaped she from his hands ?"

"That was the doing of our grandfather and our father, who was then a big lad. They both lived at the mill then, for our grandfather had not yet begun to live within the town walls. They knew the Hall well, and the prison that belonged to it ; and one dark night, when there was feasting and revelry in the house, they put a ladder to the dungeon wall, and our father, who was slim and active, managed to climb up by the chinks and crevices, and to file away a bar from the window of the little room in the tower where the poor woman was shut up. She got down in safety, and was hidden away, and got right out of the

country for a while. It was years and years before she came back ; and then the old lord was dead, and our lord was always kindly and just towards all. So she did not fear to go back to her cabin in the wood, with the little son that she brought with her. But she has been wrinkled and bent and wizened ever since ; and the old story that she is a witch clings to her yet, and will ever cling."

"And did the old earl find out how she had escaped him ?"

"It was thought that he suspected ; and for a while he was wroth with our grandfather, and then began to talk about diverting the water for the prior's mill, and some feared it would really be done. But all the town cried shame upon him, and the old earl quarrelled with the prior about the money to be paid ; and then that prior died, and another came who cared nothing about the mill and the water, but only for a good table and a quiet life. And so the thing dropped ; and as the old lord grew older he was less rancorous, and forgot he bore our kinsfolk any grudge."

As they were talking thus, they had been pursuing a very tangled path, and now came suddenly upon a tiny clearing, in the midst of which stood an old-looking cottage with thick, stained thatch and weather-beaten walls. Around it lay a little garden of herbs, in very much greater order than was usual at the period, small sand paths bordered with flint stones dividing the patches one from the other in quaint and orderly fashion.

"That is Wild Will's work," said Edgar ; "he loves his

mother, and his fingers are right clever at such tasks. See, he made yon fence of wood and wire all round about, to keep off the wild creatures of the woods from nibbling and trampling down the herbs and flowers. Folks say that to pass here after dark may be death, so strong a scent is given forth by the flowers; but that is all nonsense. She can make deadly draughts out of some, but mostly what she brews are for healing and relief."

At the sound of approaching voices a door in the hut was cautiously opened—there was no window on this side—and a strange-looking old woman looked cautiously forth. Seeing who were the guests, she opened her door a little wider, and stood revealed in her quaint peaked cap, short scarlet skirt, and linen upper dress of some coarse, home-woven texture.

Lord James stopped at a little distance, and watched the effect that the boys' tale would have upon her. She listened at first, wringing her hands and looking scared beyond power of words—not like one who had occult powers which rendered her independent of human adversaries. When, however, the sequel of the tale was told, she exhibited every sign of gratitude and joy; and taking the hands of the boys, she looked long and earnestly into their faces.

Then she spoke some strange words, in a sort of monotonous chant; at which Lord James gave a slight start, and drew near to catch their import.

"Hascombe or Beetel—Beetel or Hascombe—what matters it when both are loyal and true? Hascombe or

Beetel—both have been foes and both have been friends to me and mine. Hatred I bear to all my foes. Never will the witch forget—never will she forgive. Yet Hascombe or Beetel, be it which it may, these lads shall be my care till the judgment day.”

Edmund and Edgar exchanged glances, and the former burst into a merry laugh. He pulled away his hand, and drew a step back. He was not fond of demonstration, and Mother Bunch's quaint speech rather mystified him.

“Come, Edgar ; we must be getting home,” he said, “or mother will chide us.”

Lord James looked full at the old woman as the lads darted off, and asked in a low voice,—

“What didst thou mean by these words? What dost thou know of Hascombe and Beetel?”

She looked him full in the face.

“I know what I know. I know what no man else knows. When the time comes to speak I will speak ; but at my own time and no man's else. If ever yon lads be in peril or danger, let them come to me. I will not fail them, fail them who will.”

Then she withdrew herself and shut the door sharply. Lord James knocked once and again ; but there was no sign, and he was forced to go away, his curiosity unsatisfied.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PERILS OF TRAVEL.

MARY BEETEL stood at the door of her mill-house, shading her eyes from the level beams of the declining September sunshine. There was a look of some anxiety upon her face, and an unwonted restlessness in her movements. This was the third or fourth time she had gone out into the porch, to watch the winding road that led upwards toward the mill, and each time her face was a little more wistful and anxious than the last.

Her son Jack, a stalwart young man of some five-and-twenty summers, who was now quite equal to the management of the mill in his father's absence from home, looked down from one of the lofty windows there.

"Do not fret thyself, mother," he called out. "I misdoubt if father will be home at all to-night. The fair always lasts three days, and he had much business to accomplish. I trow he will not get beyond the Three Ravens to-night, and will be with us by noon to-morrow, but not before."

"It may be so—it well may be so," answered the mother; "and yet I would he were safely home. I had such troubled dreams last night anent him."

“Dreams, mother! Why, dreams are but the idle fantasies of the night. I dream a thousand strange and wondrous things—things of joy and things of horror; but never do I heed. Our grandam says that dreams come from what food we take at supper.”

Mary smiled and sighed. A weight lay upon her spirit, but she strove to fight against her anxieties.

It was the time of the annual Michaelmas fair in the county town, some score or more of miles away. John Beetel generally made a point of attending it, as it gave him opportunities of learning much that was useful to him in his way of business, and he was able to purchase with advantage certain things useful to him and his household, in a more convenient fashion and at a lower rate than he could do at any other time.

The great fairs in the country were rather declining at this period, owing to the increase of the local markets, and the facilities which the country people had for disposing of their products at the more numerous local centres. Indeed, some complaints on the subject had latterly been issued by the interested parties, and various steps had been taken to encourage and maintain these old fairs in their accustomed glories. John Beetel had therefore made a point of attending, and had gone with his packs well stuffed with some deft handiwork of Mary's, which was rather a specialty of hers, and which always brought back a return in the shape of clothing for the household, which went far to protect them from the rigours of the approaching winter.

Edmund and Edgar had occasionally been permitted to attend the fair; but Mary was trebly anxious when they did so, and they had therefore not accompanied the miller on this occasion. The ride was a long one for Edgar, who was somewhat less robust than his comrade; and the two lads could never endure the idea of being separated, even for the matter of a few days. They had been down the road now for a considerable distance to see if they could see anything of the father's returning figure, and now they came running back, just as the sun dipped behind the hill, to tell Mary that there was no sign of him as yet.

"Methinks he will not come to-night," said Edmund. "The rains of yesterday and the day before must have made the roads heavy for man and beast, and perchance have hindered something the traffic of the fair. Do not look so grave, motherling; he made no promise of returning to-night. Eddie and I will fare forth as soon as the sun is up to-morrow, and I trow we will bring him safe home soon after."

"If I only knew that he would not travel in the darkness," said Mary nervously, "if I knew he was safe at the Three Ravens, I should care nothing; but I have had a vision of him seeking to reach his home, tempted by the bright moonlight of these September nights, and I fear for him—I know not why."

"Even if he did travel by moonlight there would be naught to hurt him," said Edgar. "I love to be abroad in the beautiful white moonlight. The world

is like a fairy palace, and ourselves the kings of that fair realm."

Mary smiled as she looked into the boy's dreamy blue eyes. The points of difference betwixt the "twins of the mill" had become very gradually more marked with the flight of years. The boys were now turned fourteen, and no one mistook one for the other. Edmund was a full half head taller than Edgar, and more robust in all his proportions; whilst the delicacy and refinement of Edgar's lineaments were rather remarkable in a lad of the burgher class, and sometimes excited comment from strangers.

Inseparable as ever, the boys had nevertheless developed some diversity of taste and pursuit. It had been a matter of comment and criticism in Gadhelm that neither of them had been regularly apprenticed to a trade, or entered into one of those craft guilds that were growing into such a power in the towns.

They had been put to regular school work very soon after the escapade of loosing Wild Will from the pillory—an act which had savoured somewhat of law-breaking, and had created a considerable amount of comment. Both lads had showed aptitude for their books; and the lame schoolmaster—Cuthbert Beetel, their uncle, the youngest son of the now venerable Michael—was eagerly anxious that Edgar at least should be sent to college at Oxford, prophesying a brilliant career for him, and a rapid rise to fame and fortune.

But so far John and Mary Beetel had not made up

their minds on the point. They thought the lad still too young for the life of a strange city. They were resolved to wait at least till the boys were sixteen, and then, if possible, to obtain some idea as to Lord Hascombe's intended plans, if indeed he had not come back before that.

Edgar would well enough have liked the idea of Oxford, if Edmund were to accompany him thither; but Edmund was very doubtful if he cared for the life of a student. His more active temperament craved outdoor exercise. He loved to roam the forest in search of game. If ever there was any hunting party sent out from Lord Leston's castle to chase the deer or hunt one of the boars that still roamed the surrounding forests, Edmund must needs join himself to the party, and take as active a share in the sport as it was possible for a burgher lad to do. Every day, when opportunity served, he would hurry Edgar up to the Hall, and, under the eye of faithful old Martin, there go through those knightly exercises in which Lord James had instructed them, and which the old steward liked to see them practise before him. Often when Edgar was yet in the schoolhouse, prosecuting his studies with the studious master, whose favourite pupil he had speedily become, Edmund would be in the shop of blacksmith, saddler, painter, or lorimer, learning the use of the various tools, lending a hand to any who needed it, making himself acquainted with every detail of the armourer's work, till he could shoe a horse, mend a broken blade, wield axe and saw with celerity and dispatch, and in fact turn his hand to almost anything; so that if not a master of any one

craft, he was not unskilled in any; and his kinsfolk, in whose shops he made himself so much at home, each vowed that he was an excellent workman, spoiled for lack of regular apprenticeship to some one good trade.

But as Michael, the head of the family, watched the fashion in which the lads were brought up without making serious objection, it certainly seemed the business of nobody else to interfere; and as John Beetel was a substantial man by this time, it was supposed that he was able to make provision for his twin sons as scholars, if he thought them above the honest trade of the burgher citizens.

Michael knew better the difficulty that beset honest John. Although, as the years passed by, it seemed to the old man and his son more and more certain that the delicate and refined Edgar was the son of the gentle Lady Hascombe, and the robuster Edmund the true child of the mill, yet the doubt had never been actually laid at rest; and just now and again some startling look or gesture from Edmund that was extraordinarily suggestive of Lord James Fitzgerald would shake Mary's convictions for a few brief seconds.

Had the likeness been to father or mother she would have been much more shaken. But it never was; and since Lord James had been so beloved of Edmund, and had been his pattern and hero ever since those six months spent in Hascombe Hall, now several years since, there might be much in half-conscious, half-unconscious imitation. But the doubt could not be actually laid to rest, and it seemed to her impossible to apprentice to a trade

and bind to seven or more years' service a boy who might by some remote chance be Lord Hascombe's son. Besides, what one boy did the other must needs do too; they would never thrive apart. Edgar would certainly pine and Edmund fret himself into a fever if they were separated, and the voice of public opinion would be with them.

So it seemed best to let them continue their studies long after the age when other boys began to learn their trades; and so far the experiment had answered well enough, though the problem of the future began to loom before the eyes of the worthy couple, and they had sometimes talked of sending some trusty messenger over the sea to Lord Hascombe with a letter, asking what was now to be done with his son and heir, since he was almost on the threshold of his youthful manhood.

But of all this the boys knew nothing. They asked not why they had more of liberty than their companions. They took the good things of life as they came to them. At home Edmund showed himself so handy and useful that his parents declared he was more skilful with his tools than any craftsman they had ever employed, whilst Edgar made the long winter evenings pleasant to all by reciting long poems and ballads, or reading to them the quaint histories of Chaucer's pilgrims, or the lives of the saints and martyrs of early days.

Pretty Moll had married and gone into the town, and Hugh was her husband's foreman in a thriving bakehouse. Jack and the twins were left alone with the parents at the mill; but it was a very happy household, full of small

refinements quite unusual at that age in such a place, but which never seemed inappropriate to its inhabitants.

This evening, however, Mary was too restless to listen to story or ballad. She started at every sound, and often went to the door, declaring she heard the footfall of a horse. The boys did what they could to reassure her fears, which seemed to them to be groundless; and presently she came out with the thing that was so troubling her.

“It is young Greyling, the prior’s miller,” she said. “He was here this day se’nnight, and was asking thy father of his route, and if he travelled by night on his homeward way. It was not till after he had gone that I bethought me how I had caught an ugly gleam in his eyes as he heard him say that when pressed for time he sometimes travelled through the night, if the moon served. Old neighbour Greyling was none too friendly, for there is ever that feud anent the water ’twixt mill and mill; but the young man is worse than ever his father was. They say he has sworn that by hook or by crook he will have the water down the shoot that was once half dug, and will dam it up so that it may no longer come our way. It hath come into my head that he would well like to get thy father out of his path; and there be many perils that can befall a man travelling alone along a lonely road at night.”

Edmund sprang to his feet in some indignation, and was for starting off instantly in search of their father, but Jack interposed with words of common-sense.

“Nay, mother; thou must not think so ill of a neighbour. I trow that young Job Greyling would well enough

like to rob us of our water, to get a stronger current for his wheel; but he would never set upon a traveller to do him hurt—least of all upon one who knew him so well, and has so stout an arm as our father. Besides, father always rides armed, and the good mare Bess would fight with hoofs and teeth right lustily if any man sought to come nigh her to hurt her master. And young Greyling is none so full of courage as to dare attack our stalwart father. Besides, with all his faults, I cannot believe him capable of such a wish. Thou hast been dreaming and fretting, mother, till thou dost fear a figment of thine own brain. Go now to bed and sleep peacefully, and to-morrow our father will be home, and will laugh at thee for thy fears.—Edmund, look not so fierce and warlike.—If thou wilt, I will myself run down to the prior's mill and see if Job is not safely at home there. When thou dost know that, mother, wilt thou sleep peacefully in thy bed?"

The mother assented with a slight smile, so Jack took his cap from its peg, and bidding the younger lads take care of house and mill and mother, ran lightly down the hill himself, not altogether sorry to satisfy himself on this point, though he thought his mother's fears unduly aroused.

In less than an hour he was back again, his face smiling all over with reassuring brightness.

"Young Job is safe abed, and I have seen him there, and stiff from such a day's hard work as he seldom cares to take. He has been digging for ramming clay to mend

his mill withal, and has never been off the place since sunrise, so anxious was he to get the repairs made. So he has had other things to think of than to molest our father. And thou mayest go to bed and sleep safely, mother. All will be well, never fear."

Mary thanked her son, and was happier for the news; but Edmund still whispered to Edgar that they would be up before the sun and go forth to meet their father. Anything that savoured ever so little of an adventure was dear to the boy's heart.

The dew lay heavy on tree and grass as the boys started forth upon the following morning. There was a clearness in the air that often comes with rainy weather, and it was plain from the soaked condition of the ground that there had been drenching showers in the night.

Little recked the boys, however, of the sodden state of the path. They ran gaily down the hill, but turned off from the main track leading townwards, and followed a narrow bridle-path in a diagonal direction till, after about a mile, it struck into another highroad leading towards the town, but a much less frequented route than the other one.

The mire was very deep here, but the lads were used to heavy walking, and trudged cheerfully along, up one slight incline and down its corresponding slope, till the sun rose red before them. Then suddenly Edgar gripped Edmund's arm tight, and pointed to something at a distance.

"What is that?" he exclaimed breathlessly.

“What?” cried Edmund, whose eye had not caught the glint of the water as Edgar’s had done.

“See yonder! What is that great pond in the road, where no pond ever was before? See how the sun shines upon it, and seems to turn it to blood! There was never water there before, Edmund! What means it?”

Edmund shaded his eyes with his hand and looked long and earnestly. Yes, it was quite true. That was not the mere road water lying in puddles, large and small, upon which the red sunlight was striking with such dazzling brilliance. It was a great sheet of water—great to be set in the midst of the highway; and at the side of this sheet there was some strange-looking object, the sight of which caused Edmund’s heart to beat fast and furiously, as he set off running at the top of his speed.

“What is it?” panted Edgar, flying after him with steps as fleet as those of a deer.

“Saints preserve us! I know not what it is; but I fear—I fear—” answered Edmund, and choked at the words which would have told his fears.

Edgar’s cheeks grew white as he ran. The nearer they approached to the spot the more clearly did they see the object that seemed to rise out of a miniature lake in the middle of the road.

“It is the head of a horse!” exclaimed Edgar, and by the gesture of his brother’s hand he knew that he too had divined as much.

On flew the pair, and in a few more minutes were standing at the edge of a great pit, ten feet long, eight

feet broad, and they knew not how many feet deep, right in the very midst of the highroad, so that no man could pass along the road without falling therein. This pit was filled to the brim with water, and against the side of it there rested the head of a drowned horse. For a moment everything swam so before the eyes of both the boys that they could distinguish nothing clearly.

Then came Edmund's voice clear and sharp with the stress of his emotion and dread,—

“Heaven be thanked ; it is not our Bess ! See, Edgar, there is no white streak upon the face, though the poor beast looks brown in colour. Edgar, I must needs strip off my clothes and dive into this same pit, and see if some hapless rider be not lying dead there. We cannot go home with our tale to mother, and not know who hath met with this mischance.”

Edmund was like a fish in water. He had swum in the mill-pool from a child, and under Lord James's tuition had learned many feats of skill and strength to be carried out in and under the water. Edgar was little behind him in these feats, and in a few moments both boys had divested themselves of their clothing, and together they plunged into the muddy water of the pit, and dived down to its miry bottom.

A few such dives taught them all they desired to know. There was a drowned man in the pit, one hapless traveller, partly pinned down beneath his horse ; but by the exercise of some strength and skill the young divers succeeded in releasing him, and brought the body to the edge of the

water, where they could make shift to drag it up on the bank.

It was not their father—that they saw at the first glance; and a sobbing exclamation of relief broke from both as they made this discovery.

“Oh, God be thanked! Our Lady be praised!” cried Edgar, as he looked at the poor distorted features, and then covered the face with his own kerchief. “But, O Edmund, how hath this great pit come in the midst of the highway? It must have taken two or three men to dig it, and how could they dare? Why, it might have been the death of a score of hapless travellers coming from the fair, an they chanced to pass this way.”

Edmund’s face had suddenly become very grim. He was stooping and picking up handfuls of the mire which had been heaped around the pit by those who had dug it.

“I know now!” he cried. “This is the work of Job Greyling the miller. This is the ramming clay he needed for his mill. He has sent his men to dig it, and he knew right well that by this road our father was like to travel by night, with only the uncertain brightness of the moon to guide his steps. By night the gleam of the water would look little different from the many puddles in the road. A tired man and weary horse might well plunge in, as that poor traveller and his nag have done, and so perish miserably. Oh, the vile treachery of the man! But he shall not go unpunished. I will make shift to bring his crime home to him, if no man else will. Our good and

kindly father, who never did a wrong to any! Oh, the shame of it, the shame of it!"

Suddenly Edgar uttered a shout of joy, and pointed along the road they had been traversing, but in the opposite direction.

"Our father, our father! He comes, he comes!"

And sure enough, outlined large against the red eastern sky, was the figure of a horseman trotting steadily along, and by the white blaze upon the horse's face the boys knew her to be their father's faithful mare Bess.

They had been getting into their clothes before this, and now a few seconds saw them dressed, though their damp locks clung round their heads, and the drops fell in a shower as they started off to run. In five minutes or less they had met their traveller, who greeted them tenderly and gladly; but so breathless and excited were they that it was some minutes ere they could make the miller understand what had befallen, and only when he stood beside the pit and looked upon the stiff and lifeless forms of the hapless traveller and his nag did he realize what it was that had so stirred the boys.

He looked at the dead face, but it was the face of a stranger; and he covered it again, shaking his head the while. Edmund had been pouring into his ears the whole story of his own suspicions, almost choking in his excitement and indignation; whilst John shook his head somewhat gravely, as though he were by no means sure that things might not be as the boy believed.

"In any case it must be looked into, and that right

quickly," he said. "I must to the town to tell the burghers there, that they may send to repair the mischief, or cause the maker of it to do so. Yes, my boy, that is ramming clay, and I know that they use such at the prior's mill for many things. But we must judge no man before the time.—Edgar, go thou home to thy mother and tell her I am safe and sound. Stay; thou shalt ride home with the packs, and that will give her plenty to do till I come. Say nothing of this matter till we know more, but only say that I have business with my brother Thomas, and some others of the town council, and that I will be home when that is done.—Yes, Edmund, thou shalt come with me. But go not open-mouthed to all the world with thy tale. I trow well that it hath an ugly look; but we have no proof yet that Job Greyling dug yon pit; and if we had, the prior will have the right to pass judgment on him, and he will care little that one of the burgesses of the town came near to losing his life."

"He is an evil man!" cried Edmund angrily, as he helped Edgar to mount the horse, and led her carefully round the pit's edge on to the firm road, where she started off for home at a good pace with her lighter rider. "He is worse than the old prior of whom mother speaks, and whom I can remember, for he used always to stop and speak to us if he met us on the road, and say words that we never rightly understood. Yet I liked him better than this beetle-browed man with the fierce eyes and the sneering mouth. Father, what an if the miller dug yon pit by his wish? He would be glad enow to have thee out of

his way. He has been heard to say that Lord Hascombe will do naught to injure the mill in thy day, but that he will care less to humour thy son."

John turned a half-startled glance upon the boy, and asked,—

"Who told thee that?"

"Methinks it was Peter," said Edmund, after a little pause for thought. "'Tis Peter that gets most of the bits of news from the priory, and he ever declares that the prior knows some secret anent thee and our mother, and that some day he will use it for his own ends."

John looked at the boy with the same half-startled glance in his eyes, but then his face regained its customary calmness of expression, and he answered quietly,—

"The prior knows nothing to our shame, and our good lord will protect us from his malice if he strives to hurt us. But I have no fear. I have faced other priors before this one who have threatened and blustered, but naught of harm has ever come to me or mine."

It was well on in the afternoon before Edmund reached home, and then he came racing up the path in a state of wild excitement. Edgar, who had been watching for him, bearing the burden of his secret and his separation with what resignation he could, dashed down to meet him, and before they reached each other Edmund's tale had begun to be poured forth.

"It was even as we said," he cried. "Job Greyling had set two men all yesterday, and the night before that, to dig him the clay, and to dig it out of the midst of the

road by which our father would have to pass on his homeward way. And mark ye, Edgar, it was only our father who would be like to fall into the snare, of all the town-folk who might have gone to the fair; for the rest who lived within the walls would have taken the other fork of the road just where the old thorn-tree stands. Only father, who would make for the bridle-path to his mill, would take that worser road that is always full of holes and ruts. Oh, it was craftily bethought and it was craftily carried out, and if they would but bring the rascal to justice in the town court, we should be quit for ever of one pestilent rogue from the earth."

"And will they not?"

"I fear me no. The fight was raging still around the prior's gates as I left to come and bring thee the news. The mill stands within the prior's demesne, wellnigh within his walls; and when the miller found the burgesses at his gates, demanding whether or not he had done this thing, and showing the corpse of the hapless glover—for such, it seems, he was, and had been selling his wares in the town market that day, and started forth at nightfall, thinking the moon would be light sufficient for his journey—who had met his death in the pit;—as I say, when he heard the clamour, and knew that his men had owned already that the clay had been dug there, he fled incontinently into the priory by the little door from the mill meadow, where the monks pass in and out, and the prior refused to give him up, and declared that he himself would sit in judgment tomorrow and try the case in his court."

“Ay, and let him go scot-free!” cried Edgar with indignation.

“So said all the burgesses, and they are loudly demanding that they shall have some voice in the matter. The mayor of the town has on many occasions permitted the prior or his deputy to sit with him in the town court and say his say, and he demands that the same right be given him to-morrow, since the pit was dug upon town land, and a burgess of the town narrowly escaped drowning there, whilst a trader to the city has met his death. But how it will end I know not. When once the black-browed prior has said a thing, it takes mountains to move him.”

“And shall we not be able to hear what passes?” asked Edgar, setting his teeth.

“Yea, verily, but we shall; for we shall be called to witness to finding the pit and the poor glover. Thou and I are both wanted to-morrow, Eddie. Would that the testimony we shall bring might send Job Greyling to the gallows!”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRIOR'S COURT.

ALL the town was in a ferment. It was not that the fact of the digging of a great hole in the middle of the highroad provoked the popular indignation to any great extent. To be sure, it was an act that might be regarded as an error in judgment, and it might be well to take measures which should hinder the repetition of a similar offence in the future. It was the suspicion that the thing had been done with intent to cause the death, or, at least, danger of death, to one of their burghers, and he a man so much respected and beloved as John Beetel, that was the cause of the animosity engendered. Also, just now the party feeling betwixt monks and burghers was running very high. The new prior, a man who had now been perhaps six years in his present position, had displayed a spirit of quiet, determined aggression which the citizens were beginning bitterly to resent. He was a more crafty and diplomatic man than his predecessors had been, and it was whispered abroad that when he was absent from Gadhelm he was often to be seen in London or at Windsor, in the king's court, seeking and perhaps

finding favour with that monarch, who was disposed to give a hearing to every man, and especially to one who came with a gift in his hand. At first the new prior had been somewhat in favour with the burghers. He had appeared a man of less ambition than those who had gone before him, but gradually it had dawned upon them that he was really a more dangerous enemy than any of his predecessors, and already there had been hot collisions over the question of boundaries, and again over the jurisdiction of the respective courts of justice.

Matters were therefore ripe for a collision at any time; and when the miller and his sons appeared in the market-place they found it thronged with a crowd of citizens, and all the town councillors were in their robes of state, as though some great function was afoot.

John was immediately called and swallowed up in the crowd of scarlet-gowned townsmen; whilst Edgar and Edmund were pounced upon by their cousins Peter Beetel and Cuthbert Pastern, who, released for the day from their respective tasks in their masters' shops in honour of the occasion, were all agog to hear from the witnesses, who were presently to be called to the prior's court, an exact account of what had happened on the previous day, and how they had contrived to bring the body of the hapless glover out of the pool.

Edmund had told his tale a dozen times upon the previous day, but he told it again willingly enough, and the boys listened open-mouthed. Peter and Cuthbert were both older than the "twins," but there was much good

fellowship between them, notwithstanding that Edmund had frequently succeeded in bestowing a thorough good thrashing upon Peter, whose tongue had got himself and others into scrapes many a time before this.

He was almost bursting with his news now, and could only wait to hear the story he had asked for before breaking out into speech himself.

“They say the prior is in high wrath that the burghers have demanded to assist him in giving judgment to-day. He would have closed his gates against them, but a notice was posted upon them at dawn that if they were not opened to the burgesses of the city, for them to attend the sitting of the court, an entrance by force would be resorted to, and that in addition all the prior’s tenants who had not paid the king’s ferm would have their doors and windows taken off, and would be ejected from their houses for a year and a day, their goods being seized in respect of the debt to the commonalty. Moreover, it was added that this would shortly be done in any case, if the prior did not collect or make his tenants contribute their share of the common burden. They had had long patience with the defaulters, but they would wait only a short while longer now.”

Edmund rubbed his hands gleefully together.

“When they go forth to such a task, may I be there to see!” he cried. “But would they dare to do such things to prior’s tenants?”

“Marry, but they would!” cried Peter, “for I heard them discussing the matter at my father’s table last night.

I crept beneath the dresser in the shadow, and heard all the talk. It seems that in some great city of the realm—whether Canterbury, or Winchester, or Salisbury, I forget, for they spoke of many such disputes, but, at least, it was one of those places where the monks are very strong and very haughty—things but lately came to such a pass that the townfolk were wellnigh ruined by bearing the whole weight of the king's taxes and the king's ferm, because so many persons lived on church lands and refused to pay their share. So they e'en took law into their own hands, and made a raid upon them, and seized their goods, and carried them to the king's sheriff as part payment of the due. And when the abbots and priors rose in great wrath, and would have had them punished, they themselves went or sent to the king, who gave judgment in their favour, and it is now declared that the king's ferm is to be paid by all alike; wherefore my father is very bold in making yon proud prior bend his stubborn head, for Gadhelm has ever been forward to send the king's dues very faithfully to his officer, and, as he says, the city burgesses are not going to bear the whole burden much longer, and they who live on church lands shall pay their share, willy-nilly; and yon miller, Job Greyling, shall be the first to have his doors and windows taken off, an he pay not his share."

Edmund tossed his cap into the air in glee.

"Would that they would first string him up to his own gate-post, and then take away his windows and doors!" he cried, "for a scurvier knave there never lived; and yet if

the prior can make shift to save his neck he will certainly do it."

"That he will; we shall never see him hanged by sentence of the prior's court," said Cuthbert. "'Tis almost a pity, though it sounds ill to say so, that the traveller who lost his life was but a stranger to these parts. Had he been a citizen, be he never so humble an one, the feeling would have been so great that even my lord prior would have found it hard to acquit himself of guilt in this matter."

The crowd was pressing now towards the great walls of the priory buildings—walls that enclosed a very considerable area, and abutted upon one of the town gates, so that the prior had always claimed and obtained the right to use this gate as his own. Above it, on the wall, stood the gallows, to which he had the right to condemn any prisoner he should judge to be guilty of the death penalty; and this gate he had power to keep shut even against the citizens themselves, if he had a mind to, although his right to do this was always hotly disputed, and it was not often that any prior had ventured to exercise this prerogative. The sentries, however, were always men appointed by the prior, or even monks, if he chose to station them there, which had occasionally been done for special reasons during times when the party feeling had run very high. This gate had been kept closed all the previous day against the townfolk, ever since Greyling the miller had, as it were, taken sanctuary from the anger of the citizens, and pending the sitting of the prior's court, where it was sup-

posed that he would obtain acquittal of all intent to do hurt. Great excitement reigned to know whether to-day the gate would be open or not, and a shout was raised when it was observed to stand wide for all to pass, though there was a double guard stationed there, ready to close it against the incomers, should they prove more numerous or more turbulent than was thought prudent by the prior's watchmen.

But the town councillors had no intention of allowing any brawling in the prior's court. They were just men themselves, and respected his jurisdiction, though it might be unjustly stretched, even as they expected him to observe theirs. The mayor and town-clerk, together with the councillors in their civic robes, passed first through the gateway; and as old Michael Beetel looked behind him at the flushed faces and fierce eyes of the lesser townfolk, he paused a moment and lifted his hand to command silence, saying at the same time, in quietly authoritative tones,—

“No disturbance here, no brawling in the court of the prior, my good friends. Justice we will have, if it be possible, but we will obtain it by lawful means.”

No one in the place was respected more than old Michael, whose somewhat faded scarlet robe bespoke the fact of long service to his fellow-townsmen in his official capacity, both as mayor in past years, and as one of the civic band of councillors since.

The people gave him signs of assent, and marched quietly after their representatives into the hall. It was

then found that a place of some honour had been reserved for the councillors; but the townsmen who held no office had to stand packed together in a sort of pen in the background, where, however, they could watch proceedings and hear judgment delivered.

The prior did not keep them waiting long. He, with his monks in attendance, filed into the hall with silent dignity and state, and the prior took his seat on the great curved throne, and made a haughty inclination towards the burgesses, which they acknowledged by rising and bowing to him.

Then the mayor stepped forward and spoke.

His speech was brief and to the point. He claimed that as the offence for which Job Greyling had been committed had taken place on town property, as the damage had been done to the highway, and as a traveller from the town had been done to death through his act, and the life of a leading citizen seriously endangered thereby, the townsmen had a right to a voice in the trial of the accused, which he claimed on their behalf to exercise in his own person; and he concluded by observing that although long patience had been shown of late towards certain persons dwelling on church lands, that patience would not be continued if the townfolk were not fairly represented in matters in which they had such deep concern.

When the mayor resumed his seat there was a murmur of approbation throughout the hall, which changed to one of anger when it was observed that the prior took no manner of notice of this claim on the part of the mayor,

but simply signed to the lay brothers in attendance to bring in the prisoner. It was plain to all from his attitude and method that he intended to keep the matter of the trial of the accused entirely in his own hands.

When Job Greyling appeared there was a murmur like a groan, which rose and passed through the court-house like a breeze across a corn-field. But the miller showed a bold front, and the look which he cast towards the town councillors and the crowd in the background was one which looked very like defiance.

There was no doubt as to the nature of the offence of which he stood charged. The pit had been viewed by this time by a score of councillors and by half the people of the town. The body of the glover had been identified, and there were the sons of the miller to witness to having drawn it forth out of the water. The boys gave their evidence freely and truthfully, the prior eyeing them the while with an expression of countenance which had something peculiar in it. He suddenly addressed them in a tone of rasping harshness,—

“Are ye both the sons of John and Mary Beetel of Hascombe Mill?”

The boys exchanged wondering glances, and gave instant assent.

“Then how comes it that only one of you has been baptized?” asked the prelate, his glance shifting from the astonished faces of the boys to the slightly-disturbed countenance of John Beetel. “Edmund was baptized as an infant by Father Bartholomew, but no Edgar Beetel

has ever been christened by him or any other. How is that?"

The miller stood forward and looked the prior full in the face.

"Both the boys have been baptized," he said, "and I can prove the same to whomsoever hath the right to ask. But that right is not yours, my lord prior, and the question of my son's baptism hath naught to do with the matter before your reverence's court."

A note of approbation went up from his fellow-townsmen; and the prior heard it, and frowned.

"Take heed that the boy comes not to mass again in any church within my jurisdiction until it hath been fully ascertained that he hath been baptized, where, and by whom, for it is a strange thing that twin brothers were not baptized together. Have a care, John Beetel, that thou losest not something beyond the water of thy mill through thy false practices."

An indignant clamour arose from behind, checked, however, by a gesture from the mayor and his venerable father; and the prior, with an ugly look upon his dark face, turned to the miller Greyling, and asked to hear his defence.

It was given in a confident manner. The man declared that he was obliged to have this particular kind of clay for his mill repairs; that he really did not know of any other place where it could be had than the highway; that it had been dug in broad daylight, though, owing to pressure of circumstances, some had had to be taken at night;

that any traveller passing that way could see the hole full well; and that most beasts could swim a few feet, and so save themselves. He professed great regret for the fate of the poor glover, but he knew of no law which forbade his getting such material as he had need of in his trade.

The prior therefore contented himself with a rebuke, and an order that he should make good the damage he had done, and pay the expenses of the burying of the hapless traveller whose death he had caused. But inasmuch as he had dug the pit with no malicious intent, the prior added—looking round the court with calm effrontery, and utterly ignoring the testimony which had been offered respecting his grudge against John Beetel, and the inquiries made as to the possibility of his returning that way by night—that he was acquitted of any further penalty, and left with an unstained character.

At this point in the proceedings the mayor rose. He asked leave of the prior to speak a few words in the hearing of all, and to invite him, if he cared to do so, to be present in the Guild Hall to take part in the framing of some new laws for the better preservation of the public safety, as it seemed needful in the light of recent events to restrict private persons from digging holes for sand, or clay, or whatever they might require of that nature, without the leave of the mayor. He added that already the draft of these regulations had been drawn up, and would be discussed the next day before they passed into law. And the mayor remarked that such laws would be enforced upon all

persons, without distinction, who lived within the confines of the borough, and that any infringement thereof would be in future tried before the town court, and the offender dealt with as that court might direct. Meantime the necessary steps would be taken to collect the rent for the king's ferm from those who had not yet paid their share of the burden; and if they were not ready, the usual steps would be taken.

At this news the face of the prisoner fell more than it had done all the time during the former proceedings; for he had been one of those who had sought to make his occupation of church lands the excuse for shirking his share of the public burden, and he knew that with public opinion so sorely stirred against him now, there would be no chance for him. After the recent decisions in the king's courts he knew that the town councillors would be remorseless and peremptory, and that there would be no appeal. Already the crowd of townfolk was pouring into the streets, eager to see the good work begun; and the prior, with a thundery look upon his proud face, rose and swept from the hall, with something very like an imprecation upon his lips.

"War, war! war to the knife! Hurrah, hurrah!" shouted Edmund, as he tossed his cap into the air and dragged his brother out with him. "We will be there to see the fun. I trow there will be fighting, too. Men will fight for their goods and their homes; but if I know anything of the temper of our town, there will be short shrift for any of the prior's tenants now."

The crowd was surging into the market-place, and crying aloud for justice. The prior had plainly showed himself the enemy of the burghers. After such an open declaration of hostility, was it likely that the citizens would go on making up the dues for his idle and parsimonious tenants? No, they had had somewhat too much of ecclesiastical tyranny and injustice. They would show the proud prelate and his minions that the free burghesses would not be trampled upon and set aside with impunity.

The method of collecting taxes in the towns in the king's demesne was almost invariably in the hands of the municipal authorities, the mayor desiring and obtaining the post of king's sheriff, and being held responsible, with certain other notable citizens, for the amount due from the borough. This was a far less expensive method for the king, and was in keeping with the temper of the times, and the battle for freedom that was being fought throughout the country by the burgher classes. Upon feudal estates things were far more difficult of adjustment, and the burdens much more vexatious; and upon church estates there was hotter fighting than in either of the other two. The burghers on the royal demesne had distinctly the best of it, for the king was too great a man to be jealous of the increasing power of the burghers, or to wish to impose harassing restrictions upon them. So long as somebody was responsible for the prompt payment of his dues, he cared little how minor matters were arranged, and was always ready to extend the charter in response to some

substantial inducement in the way of money for an exchequer that was almost always in need of funds.

The mayor, therefore, with his chief advisers, being responsible for the king's taxes as well as the town dues, had their hands full sometimes, and had to prove themselves stern creditors if they were not to be personal losers by the arrangement. In Gadhelm, as a general rule, the people were thrifty and fairly prosperous; but there were always certain malcontents and spendthrifts, who sought to evade bearing their share of the burden, and these had for the most part congregated upon the lands owned by the monks, though not within their walls, seeking to shelter themselves behind the quibble which had long been fought out between burghers and ecclesiastics as to the question of the taxation of church tenants.

The mayor and burgesses of Gadhelm had been "lying low," as we should say, for a short time, whilst this battle was being fought out to the bitter end in some of the larger centres. But just lately it had been triumphantly demonstrated that the king's ferm was to be paid by all residents within the borough, without distinction; and the prior of Gadhelm would certainly not dare to appeal against the decision of the king's court, when not all the power of the abbots and priors of Canterbury and Winchester had availed to annul the decree.

"The king's ferm! the king's ferm!" shouted the people, as the mayor and his councillors appeared. "Down with the rogues who would cheat his majesty and ruin their fellow-citizens! Let them pay their dues, or let

them bear the punishment! We have had patience with them too long! Let justice be done!"

"Let justice be done!" roared out angry voices—"justice! justice! justice! Not such justice as the prior gives forth, but the justice of the free burgesses of a free town."

The temper of the crowd vented itself in a thousand such cries. The authorities were not averse to giving them their way. The mayor came forth out of the town hall, whither he had betaken himself with the rest who were robed, and now he signed to the people that he wished to speak.

They listened to him, and then raised a cheer of delight. He had bidden them refrain from brawling and from riot, but invited them to accompany him from house to house in that quarter where the inhabitants had refused to pay their dues, and to assist him in the exercise of his prerogative, in ejecting the inhabitants and taking toll of their goods to the amount that was due.

It was stern work, but those were stern and hardy days, and the modern passion of pity for evicted tenants found no place in the hearts of honest citizens, who paid their taxes punctually, and had scant patience with those who sought to shirk, and thus force others to bear a heavier share of the public burden. For, of course, this was what happened in such cases. The king must receive the amount in full, or the whole existing arrangement, which was so much to the liking of the municipality, would fall through. Anything was better than having the taxation taken out of their own hands. The wealthier citizens would far

rather subscribe the deficit amongst themselves than run any such danger as this. But they had scant pity for the recalcitrant and obstinate and unthrifty, who would not, or professed they could not, bear their share, and they took good care that the punishment should be a sufficient deterrent to all save actual incorrigibles.

The procession started, the mayor with his chief supporters marching first along the muddy road, holding up their long gowns somewhat gingerly, their flowing sleeves almost as much in danger from the mud as their skirts; after them came a band of stalwart craftsmen with various tools in their hands, and amongst these marched Edmund and Edgar, whose prominent position during the trial had seemed to give them a right to a foremost position in the procession. Peter and Cuthbert were just behind, and the lads were talking eagerly together.

"What meant he by saying that thou wert not baptized?" asked Cuthbert indignantly of Edgar. "It surely is not true."

"My father said it was not true," answered Edgar, whose face had been a little perplexed and troubled ever since those words in the prior's court, that had been spoken with such a sinister look, as it seemed to him, on the prior's part. "Yet why were not Edmund and I baptized together?"

"What matters it so long as thou wast baptized, as our father saith?" cried Edmund hastily, for he hated to see a cloud on Edgar's face. "Why, a hundred things might stop it. Thou wert a delicate babe; our mother has said

so oftentimes. Perchance when the day came thou hadst to stay at home, and only I was carried to the church. What matters it? what matters it? Thou must not care for the black looks of yon proud prelate. Would I could find a way to pay him back for the hatred he ever shows our town!" And the boy's fists clinched themselves, his eyes flashed, and he only shook his tawny mane impatiently when Edgar whispered something about learning to love one's enemies, and a fear that it might be wicked to feel such hatred toward a man whose life was consecrated to the service of holy church.

"Nay, but that is what angers me most of all!" cried Edmund hotly. "If he were as we are, plain burgher folk, I would not be half as wroth with him. But he calls himself a holy man of God, and he is all the while filled with the lust of wealth and of power, and the greed of gain, and the love of all good things of life. Poof! that is what makes me so wrathful and hot. He should know better—he does know better—but he will not follow that which is good."

This thought, spoken by Edmund, found favour with the crowd that followed. It was, in fact, a putting into words of the popular feeling that was growing, and growing almost unknown to them, in the minds of men, and which in the next reign led to such an upheaval and overthrow of existing monastic institutions.

"Down with the unjust prior! Down with the prior's people who pay not the king's dues!" shouted the excited populace. And when a voice in the crowd yelled out,

"And down, first of all, with the wicked miller, who pays not his dues, and seeks the lives of honest burgesses!" such a yell went up as caused the mayor to turn round and bid the people have a care, adding,—

"For if the prior can represent this as a riot, he will surely do so, and we may hear of it again. Let us do all we have to do according to the forms of the law."

It was hard work for the more turbulent spirits; and a riot, together with a fire at the mill, would have been more according to the mind of the people than a formal demand from the mayor that the king's dues must forthwith be paid, under pain of the customary punishment and confiscation. And great was the discontent of the people when the miller appeared at an upper window, and, with many a taunt and gibe, let down a bag containing the amount due, but all in the smallest coins of the realm, so that the counting of it alone was a matter that took considerable time, whilst he stood enjoying the anger and discomfiture of the mob that surged round his walls.

"It is the prior's doing! He has lent him the money!" yelled the people.

The miller laughed a scornful laugh, and banged down the window. He had scored two triumphs that day over the burgesses, and he let them see that he knew it.

It was with some ado that the mayor and his councillors prevailed to draw the people away from the precincts of the mill and the adjacent priory without inflicting some injury upon the buildings or their inhabitants; and many were the muttered threats that this was not the last of the

affair, but that the miller's day and that of the prior should come sooner or later.

They had a certain stern satisfaction later on, when the application for the king's dues was made at some of the other houses. Many of the householders, with much grumbling and threatening, produced the money, or a sufficient part of it to exempt them from instant and condign punishment; but there were a few who remained obstinately contumacious, and utterly refused to pay.

Then the mayor turned to the band of craftsmen who followed, and said briefly to them,—

“Men, you know your work. Do it!”

Instantly they sprang forward. The flimsy obstructions fell before their practised blows. Doors and windows were cut or forced from their places and carried off by a shouting crowd. The civic authorities marched in, indicated such things as were to be seized in lieu of payment of dues, after which the people, carrying the remainder of their goods, were marched out by the constables, amid the triumphant hooting of the crowd; and they knew that for a year and a day no return to their house would be possible—though, upon the expiration of that time, their windows and doors would be restored, and they suffered to re-enter their habitation, but only if they undertook for the future to bear their just share in the common burden.

These evicted persons found easy refuge for the time being in the priory precincts, where the monks welcomed them as martyrs in a good cause.

The populace escorted them thither with hootings and

laughter; and when the great doors had closed upon their retreat, they shook threatening fists at the frowning walls, and cried one to another,—

“Our day will come yet, proud prior! The burgesses of Gadhelm will remember this day! You and yours shall be paid in full, fear not!”

CHAPTER IX.

A TOWN HOLIDAY.

HAD this active ill-will been aroused in the spring-tide rather than in the autumn, it is likely there would have been some considerable strife betwixt the citizens and the inmates of the monastery. But winter weather, which in modern days seems often an important factor in the case of threatened hostility between nation and nation, acted then in as potent a fashion upon the residents of isolated towns.

Continuous and heavy rains kept the citizens and monks alike within their own walls; the market-place was flooded several times during the course of the winter, and at last became nothing but a quagmire. Stalls were washed away, footing could scarcely be found for man or beast; and when the spring winds came to dry the earth, it found the mayor and burgesses full of new plans for the paving of the market-place and the improvement of the streets, whilst the increase in the volume of water now descending to the prior's mill laid at rest, for the time being, the long-standing grievance as to its supply, and nothing was heard of the old plan of diverting one of the streams which joined

the main river in Lord Hascombe's estate, and taking off the flow of the water direct to the lower mill.

Perhaps the peacefulness of the following summer was in part due to the absence of the prior, who was, if report spoke true, making a pious pilgrimage to Rome. The sub-prior, who ruled in his place, was a man of placable temper, and had no desire to foment the ill-will betwixt monks and citizens. Moreover, he saw that it would be a mighty good opportunity for doing some sorely-needed paving in their own precincts; and so for once the burghers and monks joined forces, quarried and brought in stone from the adjacent stone pits, did their work in harmony, and even assisted each other in times of pressure. The king's dues that year were paid with unwonted alacrity by townsmen on church lands, mindful of the evictions of the previous year; and one fruitful source of contention had been done away with, owing to the fact that it had been quite impossible to beat the boundaries on May-day along the waste marshes—or the marishes, as they were called—for the good reason that they still lay under water when the time for this solemn function took place.

The boundary line betwixt church and town property was on this side somewhat difficult of definition, owing to the uncertain and shifting course of certain small streams that ran through it. The priors were continually encroaching upon land which had certainly belonged to the town in past years. Constant disputes had arisen with regard to the limits of the respective boundaries, and party feeling ran high on the subject; for although the ground in ques-

tion was too marshy for building purposes, it made excellent pasturage for cattle in the summer months, and the alluvial deposit of the winter months was the best possible manure for the lighter lands on the other side of the town.

But since there was no possibility of beating the bounds over those marshes on the May-day following the very wet winter, no dispute had arisen, although it was rumoured that there would be a pretty hot tussle upon the next occasion, for the channels had shifted more than ever during the floods, and several saplings that had hitherto helped in the definition of the boundaries had been uprooted and swept away.

The summer, however, passed away without open collision. The pasture was so rich that it served for all the beasts, whether of townsfolk or monks. The citizens were hard at work over the improvements they were making in their town, and the prior was away for the entire summer.

He returned just before Christmas-time, when the snow lay thick upon the ground. A hard frost, followed by some short, sharp frosts, kept the attention of the burghers upon their own affairs, and they were so delighted with their paved market-place and partially-paved main street as to be in a more amiable frame of mind than usual.

As if to make up for the inclemency of two successive seasons, springtide came with a burst that year, and the trees were green in April, whilst the hawthorn was in bloom for May-day.

Surely the seasons must have changed somewhat in the course of centuries, if we are to believe the accounts we

read of the May-day posies, the cherries ripe in April and May—May dukes, as they are still called—and all the sylvan sports that were reckoned a matter of course at that season with our forefathers. The change in style may account in part for this, but not entirely; it seems impossible to doubt that the springs were warmer and earlier in past centuries, as the winters were more inclement, more snowy, and settled down upon the earth more early and more determinedly than they do now.

May-day was a great day in and about Gadhelm. There was a three days' fair held in the market-place, the last day being the first of May. Minstrels and mummers flocked into the town, and set up their shows in every available space; mirth and revelry abounded, for there was a three days' holiday for all apprentices and craftsmen, in which they were free to join the revel and do as they would.

At noon on May-day the fair closed, the booths were hastily taken down, and there was a grand procession from the town hall. After this the function of beating the boundaries was solemnly performed, the whole town accompanying the civic authorities, the children in particular being required to attend, that they might remember in years to come what were the appointed limits of their borough.

Last May-day, owing to the disastrous floods, and to the still wet and inclement weather, the annual merry-makings had been much less than usual. Never had been so small a fair and so scanty an attendance of minstrels and mummers. Two days out of the three had been wet, and the weather had damped the ardour even of the most enthusiastic.

But now all promised well. The sun had shone for a week or more with almost summer heat, the cuckoo was shouting his loudest, the trees had hung out their tender tassels of green and gold, the meadows were smiling, and rich with grass and flowers. Citizens and their wives were busy getting their holiday bravery ready, and the children were scouring the woods to see where they could get the richest posies to tie upon their sticks, and to deck their May-queen withal, as they bore her in triumph through the streets.

At the mill the excitement was no less than in the town. It had been the schoolmaster's desire for some years that his scholars should enact a play within the town hall for all the citizens to see, and for a long time he had been instructing his boys in the arts of dramatic elocution. They had sometimes performed some small pieces before an admiring audience of relations, but on the last day of the fair they were to enact a more ambitious piece—a piece that Cuthbert Beetel had seen played at Canterbury when he had paid that city a visit on the previous year, and which was called "The Martyrdom of St. Thomas."

It had been a matter of considerable labour and cost to get so ambitious a piece ready for public performance, and also to buy or contrive the properties, which included mock vestments, a mitre, arms for the knight-murderers, two bags of leather containing blood, which must spout out realistically at the right moment, and also an angel which cost twenty-two pence, who flapped his wings as he turned every way upon a hidden winch with well-oiled wheels, the

construction of which celestial being had been Edmund's winter task, and had been contrived with no little dexterity.

To Edgar was allotted the part of St. Thomas, as he had by far the greatest gift for acting, together with a most retentive memory, and a saintliness of expression which was supposed to suit the part, though whether the real À Becket was of a specially saintly nature succeeding centuries have some reason to doubt.

The boys who represented the knights, one of whom was Edmund, had taken great delight in their arms and accoutrements, and were constantly meeting together to be instructed by Edmund in the dexterous and appropriate use of their mock arms. They showed such zeal and interest over the play that there was little reason to doubt that all would go off excellently.

And now the long-expected season had come. The booths were crowded together in long rows up and down the market-place. The whole town was decked with flowers. Within and without the walls the mummers and jugglers were performing to crowds of laughing citizens all dressed in their best, and free with their bits of money for the strangers who came to perform to them. The children ran about crowned with flowers, and with great posies fastened upon staves. The prettiest little maiden in the town, dressed in white robes, with a bodyguard of children about her, was dragged hither and thither in a little chariot decked with bluebells, which chariot was halted before all the best houses in the town, whilst the children sang their songs, and scrambled for cakes and comfits and small pieces of money.

The sun shone hotly down upon the revellers ; there was never a drop of rain, or even a cloud in the sky. Never had May-day revelry been so joyous before, or had everything gone off with such gusto and harmony.

And now the last day had come. Already many of the booths were being taken down, for the salesmen had disposed of their entire stock, and were willing enough to wend their way homewards again with light loads and heavy pockets. The citizens with their wives and families were flocking into the Guild Hall, to take their places for the play, and certain burghers were showing them into the seats provided, whilst the hall was filled with a pleasant buzz of talk as the audience discussed the successful fair, and speculated upon the talent of the boys, of which they were soon to have a specimen.

Suddenly there was a clatter of horse-hoofs upon the pavement outside, and heads were turned to see a party of youthful riders, dressed in the velvets and satins of the nobility, halt at the great open doors, and, after a brief parley with some burgesses there, leap from their handsome chargers, and come up the steps together, laughing and talking in loud tones.

"Faith, but it is my Lord Leston's son," whispered one of the citizens in a loud tone. "That dark, slight youth is he, and these are his comrades and friends, I trow. I heard they had some fine company at the castle. He has brought his guests to see the sights of the fair."

There were five young men in the group that came laughing and talking up the hall, ushered by an obsequious

citizen, and set in the places originally designed for the leading burgesses of the council. Doubtless there might yet be room for these functionaries, but democratic as the burgher was in some of his tenets, the day of showing incivility to those in higher stations in life had not yet come. The burgher might inveigh against the noble, but brought face to face, he treated him with deference and respect. Moreover, in Gadhelm there was almost no friction betwixt the citizens and the nobles, for the latter had no feudal rights in the borough, and both Lord Hascombe and Lord Leston had behaved well towards the burghers whenever any question had arisen between them, and were in consequence respected and beloved.

The most remarkable figure in the little group was that of a boy who looked about fourteen, although he was not in reality so much. He was tall and stalwart and very strongly made, with a squareness of build that bespoke considerable physical power. He was dressed very richly in white satin slashed with crimson velvet, and his breeches were of soft white leather richly embossed in gold, the fine workmanship of which riveted the eyes of the workers in leather, as being something beyond their skill in the craft. The youth wore a heavy gold chain about his neck, with a pendant that sparkled with gems, and the clasp of his velvet riding-cloak was also set about with precious stones. He had a square, ruddy face and a mass of golden-brown curling hair, strong white teeth, and rather bright blue eyes that flashed and sparkled with peculiar keenness, though merriment was their customary expression.

His voice was loud, and he passed jest after jest with his comrades, who seemed very eager to hear his words, and to laugh uproariously at his remarks.

"Who is he?" asked the citizens in a whisper one of the other, but none could give the answer.

"Some young noble on a visit to my Lord Leston, belike," was the general response. "See how the young lord defers to him; he must be some exalted personage. I wonder how he will like our poor little play."

It seemed as though he liked it mightily, for none was louder in applause as the play proceeded than the richly-dressed boy with the ruddy gold locks. He clapped his hands and shouted lustily; he gave forth the general opinion both of St. Thomas and of his adversaries with a boldness that none of the rest of the audience would have dared exhibit. He did not interrupt the speakers—he was no unmannerly listener—but in the interludes he made a running and witty commentary upon the play and its actors, together with such shrewd and pertinent remarks about the pride and aggression of spiritual lords, and the need to keep them reminded that their functions did not pertain to this world, but to the next, that the citizens could not but express their approval by murmurs of admiration, till the boy looked over his shoulder, and found himself observed by all in the hall.

No whit abashed, he rose and looked round him. The curtain—for there was a curtain to screen the stage when changes were to be made, albeit it was no usual thing in those early days—was just then down, in preparation for the

final scene in the drama now close at hand. The eyes of the whole hall were now fixed upon the young noble, whose personality had attracted attention in a wonderful way.

“So you know something of ecclesiastical aggression even here, my friends!” he said. “It is the same cry wherever we go—fat monks, lazy abbots, grasping priors, and the ambition of the bishops and prelates making mischief everywhere. Well, well, well, have patience for a while, and perhaps the remedy may some day be found. England has made shift to rid itself of many tyrants in the course of her history. Maybe the day will yet dawn when the tyranny of the church shall find itself overthrown.”

The boy sat down suddenly, laughing aloud; and the citizens looked one at the other, and asked, “Who is he? What doth he mean?” But there was none to answer the question; and at that moment the curtain was pulled aside, and all were instantly absorbed in the final tragedy of the death of St. Thomas.

Everything went off to admiration; the boys acted with real appreciation of the theme. Edgar looked the saint and martyr to the life; Edmund was a right knightly figure. The murder caused all to hold their breath in awe, so realistic was the death scene; and the angel did his part in a really effective manner, standing guard, as it were, over the murdered prelate, and terrifying the murderers from the body of their victim.

Applause loud and long followed the conclusion of the

piece, and Lord Leston's companion was vociferous in his approval. He put his hand in the pouch that hung at his side, and flung some pieces of money carelessly upon the stage; then taking the arm of his companion, he went down the hall, nodding to the burgesses, who instinctively rose to their feet; and so he went out into the sunshine, where the gaily-trapped horses, held by serving-men in Lord Leston's livery, were impatiently champing their bits and pawing the stones. He was in the saddle and off, laughing to the last; and when the boys picked up the pieces of money he had scattered, they were amazed to find that each one was a gold rose-rial, a coin scarce ever seen in country districts, and of the value of twenty shillings each—a small fortune in those days.

“Who can he be? who can he be? Why, the king's son could not be more lavish!”

“If the king's son be like the king,” spoke one burgher with a slightly-sardonic expression, “he will be little likely to throw about his rose-rials in such fashion. The king knows how to gain money and how to save it; but he understands little of the art of spending or of giving, if all we hear be true.”

So the mystery of the young noble's identity remained a mystery still. But the actors were overjoyed at the wonderful largess they had received, which not only paid many times over the cost of the play, but left them quite a handsome fund for the future.

And now came the solemn function of the boundary beating. As the great clock in the Guild Hall tower

boomed out the hour of noon, an imposing procession issued forth, headed by the mayor; and all the burghers fell into place behind him, the councillors wearing their robes of office, and the others their best holiday attire.

All carried weapons in their belts, as was the fashion of the day; but the townsfolk knew that there was always the possibility of these being wanted for something else beside mere ornament before the day was over. It had been evident for some weeks that the monks meant to take advantage of the change in the water-courses, and the removal of certain landmarks, to make a stand for an unjust boundary line, and every burgher was resolved not to submit to such aggression. The ambitious prior was now back, and had given evidence that his temper had in nowise changed for the better. Some said that he had been puffed up by the reception he had met with from the Pope, others that he had been carrying on various underhand negotiations during his absence, and that he had plans in his head which boded no good for the citizens; but however this might be, it was felt certain that the day would not pass without some sort of tussle, and there was a sense of excitement and exhilaration in the minds of the more belligerent burghesses, who felt that it was time the aggressive policy of the prior met its check.

Master Mason was the mayor for the year, and he had taken his precautions for the due enforcement of his and the town rights. In this he was ably seconded by his councillors. As he looked to his following he perceived that they lacked neither in arms nor in the

resolution to use them in a good cause; and there was a grim smile on his face as he led off the procession, which was preceded by certain servants of the civic authorities walking in front, bearing an ox's skull upon a long pole.

A band of minstrels accompanied the procession, and certain young boys were led by the hand by father or brother, and from the smiling expression of their faces it was evident that they knew they had some part to play. With these persons walked a number of labourers in clean white smocks, bearing each a new spade on his shoulder; whilst some big lads, amongst whom were Edmund and Edgar, had long white wands in their hands.

The procession moved out in decorous order from the South Gate, and down towards the farthest limit of the borough upon that side. Arrived there, the ox's skull was solemnly lowered, and strings were attached to it. Meantime the men with spades were busy digging a hole; and when this was of sufficient depth, one of the small boys was lowered into it, whilst one of the boys with the white wands gave him three light blows over the head and shoulders, and the people shouted aloud, "Remember! remember! remember!"

Then the mayor stepped forward and held out a piece of money to the urchin, who scrambled out of the hole with a beaming face, and ran to his mother in the crowd behind to show his prize.

Then the procession started, the skull being dragged along the boundary line, whilst the minstrels played a merry tune, and the people laughed and shouted for joy.

At regular intervals a halt was called, a hole dug, a small boy set therein with the same ceremonies and injunctions to remember, and the same largess from the mayor.

They had made a start from the priory walls, which formed on one side a perfectly-defined boundary line, and as the circuit of the town was made from the outside, they were of course gradually approaching the marshes, which lay upon the other side of the monastery, and formed the debatable ground.

As the procession neared this place it was evident that something was astir, for instead of the low-lying meadows being occupied only by grazing beasts and flocks of geese and wild-fowl, it seemed as though every monk in the place had come forth to take the air. The fields were dotted with cowed and brown-frocked figures, and as the townsfolk approached the uncertain boundary line these figures gathered closer and closer together, till at last they seemed to draw up in something very like a solid phalanx.

Just at this point the mayor called a halt for the purpose of digging a hole, and sent a servant to request the monks to retire to their own grounds, as he and the townsmen had come to mark their boundaries afresh. The citizen gave the message to one of the priory servants, a lay-brother, who made somewhat insolent answer that the reverend fathers had come forth to take the evening air in the meadows, and that they would be no source of inconvenience to the townsmen so long as they kept within their own proper limits, which they had

wellnigh reached. But he added that the prior would have no rabble of citizens encroaching on his lands and treading down the pasturage of his beasts.

This reply provoked a murmur of deep indignation from the citizens, who saw the monks assembling themselves on the bank of a runnel of water which had never been any sort of town boundary before, and was a good two hundred yards farther from the priory than any boundary hitherto claimed.

They set their teeth; they foresaw a struggle; but they kept their rising anger well under control. The procession moved onward at a dignified pace, till at last the mayor and the prior stood facing one another on opposite sides of the ditch.

"Halt, sir!" spoke the prior haughtily. "You and your following come no farther. The water-course has ever been the boundary betwixt mine and thine. Thus far, but no farther, or you will have to answer for it to the king's majesty."

"Ay, I will very readily answer for it to the king's majesty," answered the mayor as haughtily as the prelate. "Think you, Sir Prior, that we have not our charter and our liberties plainly set forth for all the world to see? The king's seal and stamp are on our parchment, and by its terms we mean to abide. Stand back, you and your monks, or else take the consequences of what must follow."

"Stand back, you insolent traders of the town!" thundered the prior, his haughty blood aflame at the tone taken towards him by one he scorned as being nothing but

a craftsman, in spite of his scarlet and fur of office. His travel in foreign lands had bred in him a deeper contempt than ever of the burgher class, and he had imbued his monks with his own proud spirit.

“Stand back, ye rabble and offspring of serfs!” cried the monks behind, echoing their prior’s tone, if not his actual words. “If you dare to cross the line of our just boundary, ye fools and low-born traders, ye shall answer to the king himself for your lawless temerity.”

“Lawless! A fine word for monks and friars, who break the laws themselves, and teach men to break or evade them!” thundered a voice in the crowd, which was taken up by scores of lusty throats.

The grievance of “benefit of clergy” was a very real one in the Middle Ages and down to the day of which we treat, and many a miscreant escaped due punishment of his offences by pleading that powerful quibble.

“Down with the false boundaries of the false monks!” cried a clear boyish voice, as Edmund, wound up to the highest pitch of excitement, leaped lightly across the ditch, and landed in the midst of the cowled and gowned figures.

It was like a match to a train of gunpowder. The next instant Edgar, Peter, Cuthbert—all the wand-bearers, in fact—were over the ditch and in the thick of a mimic fray, pushing back the obstructing barrier of fat and stalwart monks, and striving to make a path for the procession. But the townsmen were not going to be left behind by their own sons and brothers. In the twinkling of an eye all order was at an end; strong men, with staves

in their hands and weapons in their belts, were over the ditch, and in a hand-to-hand tussle with the gowned assailants. It was the monks who first whipped out shining weapons from under their frocks, but the example was quickly followed by the excited and enraged townsmen. The mayor and councillors in vain called upon the burgesses to wait awhile, and see if argument would not prevail; the blood of both parties was now up, and the fight was hot and sharp. The prior alone stood his ground, a dark flush upon his face, and he raised a threatening hand and shook his fist in the face of the civic authorities.

“Ye shall answer for this to the king, ye insolent knaves of burghers; ye shall see what the king will say to the disturbers of the realm’s peace!”

If the mayor felt any uneasiness, he expressed none either in look or word.

“The king shall hear of it, do not fear,” he retorted. “He shall hear of the aggressions of my lord prior, and how he seeks to wrest the ground of honest and thriving traders, who live peaceable lives, and bring up families of loyal servants for the king and the realm; he shall learn how they are robbed and harassed by a parcel of idle and lazy monks, who live upon the fat of the land, but shirk the burdens thereof, and neither bear arms in the king’s service, nor pay their share towards the equipment and maintenance of those who do. We will soon see which the king values most—his hard-working, thrifty craftsmen or his fat and greedy monks!”

“Insolent!” cried the prior furiously.

“Arrogant!” retorted the mayor with equal heat.

The prior turned on his heel, and drew the cowl over his head. It was indeed better for him to be gone, for there could be but one end to the unequal combat, and the monks were flying behind their walls with the greatest haste. They had shown fight for a short while, but were helpless before their stronger and more numerous assailants. Some few on both sides were wounded, and one luckless townsman had met his death, being of those who had rushed forward first, using his staff, and had not been prepared for the thrust of a long stiletto of foreign make which a black-browed young monk had wielded with only too much skill.

The conclusion of the boundary beating was carried out hastily and with grave faces, and the procession, as it wound its way back to the market-place, bore with it the dead corpse of one of their number; so that the holiday closed in silence and wrathful murmurings, and with the feeling that the feud betwixt town and monastery was begun rather than ended.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE FOREST.

THE town was in the greatest jubilation. The merry-making had engendered a sort of wildness of spirit that broke out in a number of ways. The prior was burned in effigy in the centre of the market-place on the following night, a huge bonfire celebrated the victory of the burghers over the monks, and for a week or more no cowled or brown-gowned figure cared to show itself in the streets of Gadhelm.

The mayor and his officers took no part in these ebullitions of popular feeling, but it was said that they sympathized with the spirit which prompted them; and certainly when some mandate from the king's court upon the subject of the "riot" and unseemly proceedings of May-day was brought to the civic authorities by a fine mounted messenger, the warning or injunction was very lightly received, the mayor flourishing the town charter in the face of the messenger, and declaring that neither he nor his townsmen had gone one hair's-breadth beyond its terms.

So the messenger rode back the same way that he came,

and matters resumed their normal appearance in the town ; but the feeling betwixt the ecclesiastics and the burghers had grown in bitterness, and the rule of the present prior was not likely to heal the breach.

It must not be thought from this, however, that Gadhelm was a town ill-disposed towards religion, or at feud with Holy Church, as it was still called. On the contrary, the citizens were proud of their own well-built little church hard by the Guild Hall, and they felt both affection and respect for the worthy parish priest who lived within its precincts and worked amongst them with much good will.

It was the monastic system that was gradually growing abhorrent to the people of England. It was the monks who were held in disesteem and derision. Stories were whispered abroad of the laxity that prevailed in the so-called religious houses. In the reign of Henry the Sixth the preaching friars had themselves made something very like a crusade against the selfish and easy life of the regular monks. The burghers began to say openly that monks were no better than other men, and often worse ; that they were of no use to the commonwealth of the towns in which they lived ; that they were a burden, and not a help, to the kingdom.

The conditions of life were changing. Men began to feel that the old excuse for the monastic life no longer existed. Men could serve God and live godly lives without shutting themselves up within cloistered walls to do it. Learning could be obtained by others than

ecclesiastics now ; and printing, although yet in its infancy, was showing the world that men need no longer be dependent upon the parchments and illuminated scrolls prepared by the monks. More than this, the founders of the grammar schools all over the country were insisting more and more upon secular teachers for their children in preference to ecclesiastics, and many had been the disputes upon this very question, helping to widen the breach betwixt layman and monk.

The burghers were generally victorious, for since they built and endowed their own schools, it was not easy to enforce upon them teachers of the objectionable race. In some towns statutes were even put into force against those who sent their sons to be taught by the priests or monks, obliging the parents to send them to the town school ; and the priest of the place was in some cases debarred by local statute from teaching any children at all save the one boy allowed him to assist him in his services.

All these causes of friction served to keep alive the old grudge between ecclesiastic and layman, although the townsmen might be sober and godly people enough, with no quarrel against religion or the regular priests who served their churches.

Edmund and Edgar were now strong, well-grown lads of sixteen, and had learned pretty much all that their teacher at the school was able to teach ; and though they went still to and fro to the town with fair regularity, and Edgar often lent his assistance in imparting information to the younger boys, their education was practically at an

end, and there was a sense of expectancy and uncertainty regarding their future which at last the boys themselves began to understand and whisper about.

The words of the prior upon the day of the miller's trial had first stirred within the boys some wondering consciousness of a secret pertaining to their lives, and the words of John and Mary Beetel had confirmed the impression.

They did not hide from the boys that there was a secret of which they were not at present able to speak, and that it concerned one of them, though which they would not say. Nor did the boys desire to know; for to them what concerned one concerned the other equally, since never were brothers so close akin in heart and spirit, sharing every thought and aspiration, and drawn all the closer by the differences of temperament which the lapse of years had brought out.

They understood now that there was some reason why they had been brought up somewhat differently from other boys, why they had not been put to any settled craft, why they had been given a greater liberty and encouraged to get more learning than the average burgher cared to possess, and to make themselves master of more knightly exercises than their companions had ever been taught. They did not speak of these things save to each other. They mingled on terms of perfect equality with the town boys when they were with them, and yet they secretly felt as though a gulf divided them from the life of the burgher citizen. Edmund was eager for going out into the

world like a knight-errant of old, with his good steed and his good sword and his brother for companion, and finding fame and fortune in the exploits and adventures which were certain to await him there.

Edgar, for his part, was divided between the wish for the life of adventure and that of the student at the young University of Oxford. From time to time his wishes turned that way, especially if some travelling clerks or students chanced to pass through Gadhelm towards their *alma mater*, and should stop for a night at the inn, and regale the host and his family with tales of Oxford life. Edgar on these occasions always contrived to make one of the party; and sometimes he was invited to dispute some point with one of the students, for Gadhelm was right proud of its young scholar; and so well did he generally hold his own, that loud encomiums had been passed upon him, and he had been told by many that Oxford was the place for him, and that he had better lose no time in presenting himself there.

And yet the miller and his wife hesitated. Lord Hascombe had sent them word through Martin from time to time that he was positively coming home ere long; and although no reply came to their questions, growing in urgency, as to the future of Edgar, this message was taken to be an injunction to them to make no change in anything till the father came himself to decide what he wished done.

Martin concurred in this conclusion, and obedience had been the watchword of the worthy couple all through. So

that when the boys questioned as to their future, and wove the fabric of their dreams into glowing pictures for their mother's ears, she would only gently shake her head and bid them have patience, saying that the time would come when they would see the world in some fashion, but what the fashion would be she did not well know.

"Methinks we have had patience long enough!" cried Edmund to his brother one glorious midsummer day, as they roamed the forest together, he carrying on his wrist his pet tame falcon, that from time to time he loosed and set upon some quarry. "I cannot see why we may not fare forth in search of our fortunes abroad, since we be not set to any craft in the town, as other lads are. We can ride and tilt and wield sword with any lads of our age, I take it, to say nothing of skill at quarter-staff and with bow and arrows. I chafe against this long idleness. It was pleasant for a while, but I am growing weary of it. Why are we different from others? Are we not the sons of the miller and his wife? And if not, whose sons are we?"

Edgar shook his head, as he had done many times before. That they were not brothers and twins had never yet suggested itself to their minds, but it had occurred to them that they might be adopted children of the mill, and the thought was full of vague possibilities, which had done something to stir the blood in their veins, and fill them with strange longings.

But there was no time for them to discuss the problem that day, for, as it were from the very ground beneath

their feet, there suddenly arose a wild, quaint figure—a man garbed in a leather doublet and long, soft, untanned leggings, with elf-locks hanging over his shoulders, and eyes that roamed restlessly and timidly round him like those of some wild creature of the woods.

“Wild Will!” cried the boys in a breath, and ran to him with friendly words of welcome; for they seldom saw him now, though it was known that he was ever lurking in the woods, and whenever some fat hen or young sucking pig or kidling was missing from farm or cottage all round Gadhelm, the witch’s son had the credit of being the thief, albeit he had never been caught again.

Edmund and Edgar would meet him in their long woodland rambles, and would sometimes pay a visit to the old woman’s lonely hut; but both mother and son kept more and more aloof from their kind as the years passed by, and only the more daring spirits of the place ventured to the lonely cottage, now almost hidden within its quick-set hedge, to purchase from the old beldam those draughts and ointments and simples which healed so many wounds, and assuaged fevers faster than any of the potions the leeches gave, and that without the letting of blood.

To be sure, there were some who feared that they might get more than they bargained for at the hands of the witch, and that death rather than recovery might follow the taking of her nostrums. But for all that, they sought her and bought her wares; and upon the sale of her herb medicines and the spoils of Will’s hunting the pair lived, never seen within the limits of the town, dependent upon

the good nature of one or two well-meaning persons, of whom Mary Beutel was one, for the purchase of the few articles they needed in the matter of clothing and house-keeping.

“Why, Will,” cried Edmund, “where hast thou been this great while? We have not set eyes on thee since I know not when.”

The fellow put a finger on his lips and looked round with a furtive glance, saying at last in a muffled whisper,—

“I have been watching the ghouls at work.”

The boys exchanged glances; a look of intense curiosity crept over their faces. They drew a step nearer and gazed into his face.

“Hast thou heard it too, Will? None would believe us. They said it was but fantasy, or else that the pixies were abroad. Hast thou heard the strange sounds by night—pick, pick, pick; thud, thud, thud? What doth it mean, good Will? what doth it mean? We have sought the forest through and through by day, and can find nothing; yet by night, when we have escaped the watchful eyes at home, and have wandered forth into the woodlands, again and again have we heard the strange sounds; but if we speak of them men mock us, or else cross themselves and say that it must be the work of fairies or of evil spirits.”

“Evil spirits! Ay, that may well be,” answered Will, with a cunning look; “but they be spirits that are burly of form and rubicund of face, and they are habited in

brown gowns, and when they walk to and fro they draw their cowls close about their faces, and walk with mincing steps, telling their beads as they go." And Will, in unconscious imitation, began to show what he meant.

"The monks!" cried the boys in a breath, and looked into each other's eyes with a sudden comprehension, and a gust of rising passion.

"They are at some devilry with the mill water!" cried Edmund, clinching his fist. "I guessed that the prior would not let that grievance slumber long; but what can they be doing so secretly and at night? Will, dost thou know where they work?"

He nodded, his eyes gleaming, a cunning look creeping over his features.

"I know every inch of the forest; I know every plant that grows; I know the haunt of every bird and beast. Should I not know where the moles are working too—the brown moles with their picks and shovels, who come at midnight and steal away at cock-crow? Ghouls I call them—ghouls and grave-diggers. Come, and I will show ye twain where they work. I would show it to none other."

The boys exchanged glances again, for they had searched the forest tracks and the woodland dells again and yet again, and had found no trace of any digging or delving, and had come to regard the sounds with a thrill of superstitious fear. But Will walked onward with his soft, cat-like step, and his quick glances from side to side, as though in fear of some lurking, unseen foe; and they followed him as fast as they were able, though they had

not his skill and craft in slipping through the tangles of the woodland brushwood almost with the silence and swiftness of a snake.

Soon they were plunging downwards through a very thick tangle, which prevented them from seeing the way for a yard in advance, and beneath their feet the stones rolled downwards, and bounded along with a rushing of sand and gravel. This was quite a new spot to the boys—a deep cleft in the hillside, so thickly overgrown that it seemed a marvel how Will could pick his way as he was doing with such certainty and ease. They had not even known of the existence of this chasm, and plunged down it with deepening curiosity. They could hear not far away from them the ripple of the water, and the tinkling sound of the little waterfall in the tributary stream, which brought to the river such a valuable volume of water a little above the mill. Suddenly it came upon them what it all meant. The monks were carrying on some nefarious scheme of their own for diverting the course of the water. This cleft was to be turned into a new water-course, and when all was ready they would come, still by night, break down the bank which John Beutel and his forefathers had made like a strong dam, with a view of defeating any such plan on the part of the prior's servants. Given a fresh channel to the leaping torrent, it would rush gaily down this deep chasm, and join below that sluggish water-course, which then would run with a full volume of water, and give to the prior's mill just that supply which he had so long coveted.

Edmund drew his breath hard and clinched his teeth.

“The villains, the villains! the hypocritical rascals! But we will defeat them yet!” he muttered. “Sons of Holy Church, forsooth! Sons rather of the devil—the arch-deceiver! A murrain upon all such! Working by night, stealing away by cock-crow! False liars and traitors!”

And now they had come to the scene of the midnight operations. It was plain that a very considerable task had been achieved in deepening the chasm, in carrying it nearer and nearer to the bed of the stream, and in building up the walls, so that the water would not escape in many runnels, but would come flowing down in one strong leaping torrent, till the natural chasm caught it and directed its course aright.

The wider and lower end of the little gorge was well known to the boys, and to all frequenters of the forest; scarcely any one knew of the little narrow cleft communicating with it, and running back quite close to the bed of the stream.

It had been recognized by former lords of the manor and owners of the mill that, from the double fall in the ground just here, it would at any time be an easy matter for the bed of the stream to shift from one channel to another; but care had been taken to dam up the bed of the stream well upon this side, and thus no real anxiety had ever existed upon the point, save at such times as the priors had sought to obtain consent to divert the stream for their own use.

The boys now stood in a small, hollow, quarry-like place, and surveyed with comprehending eyes the work that was being so secretly carried forward.

Will's eyes gleamed with a pride in his own cunning in having found out the secret, and Edmund's with deep indignation at the underhand treachery of the scheme now afoot.

"The mean hounds!" he cried. "Would that my Lord of Hascombe were here to see. They have taken advantage of his long absence. They cannot win him to their cause, so they think to carry their point by stealth. They seek to do a deed in deadly secrecy, and then when it is done they will doubtless call it some convulsion of nature, and say that Heaven has fought for them."

This was so like the probable tactics of the prior that Edgar could not restrain a laugh. But there was deep indignation in the hearts of the boys, for they felt sure that this work would not have been resolved upon and carried out so strenuously without a very resolute determination on the prior's part to carry it through; and who could tell whether by guile or subtilty he might not have some warrant for his act, purchased perhaps from Lord Hascombe, when he had been absent in Italy? True, he might, under these circumstances, have worked more openly; but, on the other hand, he had plain proof of the temper of the townspeople of late, and he might think it safer and more politic to keep the thing quiet until the very last moment.

Having examined everything that had been done, the

boys made their way out of the hidden chasm ; and whilst Will vanished, after his manner, amid the tall ferns and thick undergrowth, Edmund and Edgar plunged into the forest paths, and talking earnestly and excitedly over this matter and the villanous conduct of the prior, soon forgot time and place, and all besides, in the heat of their argument.

It was with something like a start of surprise that they suddenly heard a boy's merry laugh close beside them, and looking quickly round, they beheld half lying, half sitting, within a big hollow tree, the figure of a lad a little younger than themselves, with a square, ruddy face, golden-brown hair, and a dress that bespoke him of a higher rank than their own, as did also the jewels that gleamed here and there about his person.

He did not rise as the two lads stood before him, but looked up in their faces with his blue eyes dancing with amusement. But as he regarded them his face changed, lighted up with a different sort of smile, and there was quick recognition in his merry glance.

"By the mass, 'tis none other than the holy St. Thomas! Truly the saints have set me in good company to-day. Good-morrow to you, fair archbishop. I am rejoiced to see your holiness so well recovered of the wound inflicted by this brave knight's good sword. Sir Reginald Fitzurse, an I mistake me not? Well, well, I am in luck to have lighted upon such good company."

Edmund looked full at the speaker and laughed gaily.

"I trow by that, my lord, that you are e'en one of the

young nobles who were with my Lord Leston—the young lord—to see our poor play on May-day. I trust your lordship was pleased; and perchance you can e'en tell us who was the great and wealthy noble who bestowed upon us such a wonderful largess. It hath been the marvel of the town ever since."

The boy was laughing merrily.

"Oh, my Lord Leston has many noble and wealthy friends; but mistake me not, good lads. I am no noble—not I. And for the rest, I have lost the hunting party with which I started forth at dawn of day, and here am I as lost a soul as ever wandered in the realms of Hades. So have compassion on my forlorn estate, and take me somewhere where I may find food and drink; for I was never a friend to fasting, and it agrees not with my stomach nor my pleasure."

Laughing in the boisterous way that seemed natural to him, he took the lads one by either arm, and looking in their faces, he cried, still in the same bantering way,—

"And how are ye known in your own homes, holy St. Thomas and bold Sir Reginald? What names do ye bear there?"

"We are called Edmund and Edgar Beetel, and our townfolk call us the 'twins of Hascombe Mill.'"

"Edmund and Edgar—good old Saxon names. As for me, they call me Hal who know me best, and sometimes Madcap Hal is the name I bear. So now that we are friends, and know each other thus far, tell me of what it was ye were talking so eagerly as ye approached unto

the tree where I had lain me down to rest. It seemed to me that ye were in a mighty wrath; and I love to know the quarrels of just men, that, if it be Heaven's will, they may e'en be set right."

Edmund, nothing loth, plunged into a rapid and excited history of the long-standing grievance betwixt prior and townsmen, and in particular the grievance about the water for the mill. He was too full of his subject to pause or wonder at the words in which this lad, who had disclaimed the title of a noble, had couched his request; and neither he nor Edgar knew that this was the very lad, out of the group who had come to the Hall with Lord Leston's son on May-day, who had thrown the rose-rials, and whose air and bearing and sumptuous dress had excited so much comment and question. They had been absorbed in the play, and had been little conscious of their audience. They could see by the air and manner of this youth, and by his evident familiarity with Lord Leston, that he was of gentler birth than their own; but his hunting dress did not show any very great magnificence, and though the few jewels on clasp and dagger-hilt were of considerable size and brilliance, the "twins of the mill" were too little versed in such matters to pay great heed to that.

"A proud and haughty prelate, in sooth!" cried the youth, with a sparkle in his blue eyes. "I know the kind. They have been the cause of many woes to this land, and will be the cause of many more, I take it, ere time has run her course. So you beat them back over your boundaries. Oh, good townsmen, I love to hear

that ye can wield your arms so boldly in defence of your rights! And the monks were driven back howling and yelling. Would I had been there to see! I must have a look at this proud prior ere I take my way hence. I must tell this tale to my good father. It will win a laugh even from him."

Edgar flashed several keen, fleeting glances into the face of their new companion. He detected in his words, in his accent, and in the peculiar and almost unconscious authority of his tone, a something he could neither define nor analyze, but which conveyed to him an impression that there was something behind the personality of the stranger more than he wished to appear. Once Hal met one of these searching glances, and answered it by a quick lighting of the eyes; but he only pinched Edgar's ear and said,—

"Let not the eyes of the beetles see too much, my young friend. Other folks can have their masquerade besides holy St. Thomas and bold Sir Reginald. But if thou must see too much, at least thou canst keep thy mouth shut, eh?"

Edmund did not heed or hear this by-play; he was all aflame with the tempest of his wrath. Suddenly Hal put a hand upon his arm and said,—

"Now, peace a moment, and let me speak. First take me home with you, that I may refresh myself at your good father's board; and as you love victory and to play a right royal trick upon yon haughty prior, speak not a word anent this matter at home. After we have eaten

and drunk, then shall ye take me to this place of which ye have spoken, and there we will take counsel together what shall be done; for, trust me, I will not leave these parts till I have seen an end of this business, and yon proud prior abased and humbled to the dust."

Edmund gazed at him in breathless wonder and amaze.

"But how—how, my lord?" he asked, seeing something in the look and bearing of the boy which caused the title of respect to spring instinctively from his lips.

"Nay, but call me Hal, your comrade Hall, for the nonce," was the laughing response. "Whether I be your lord or not, we can leave another day to settle. Ye are lads after mine own heart—I see it, I feel it. And as for the how, and the why, and the wherefore, thou shalt see for thyself that what I have spoken is no idle boast. But hurry, hurry, hurry! My inner man crieth aloud for food. And when we have dined, then away to the woodlands again. The free forest for me! I would that I had been born a son of the people, that I might fight with monks, and act plays, and roam the woodlands at will!"

Edgar gave him another shrewd glance; but Edmund was all afire with excitement. Hal had to caution him again as they drew near to the mill.

"Not a word to any; upon your life, not a word to your father or any man else. To ourselves we will look to upset this nefarious scheme. The burghers may fight their boundary battles, but we will be rangers of the free forest, and meet the mole-monks on their own ground, and fight them with their own tools. They shall have water

for their mill—ay, they shall have water. They shall have more than they bargain for.”

A sudden light flashed into Edmund's eyes; a sudden gleam of white teeth gave response as Hal's loud laugh rang out. No more was said, for already they were close at the mill, and Mary had come forth to welcome the stranger and ask what she could do for him.

“Marry, feed him, good mother, feed him,” answered Hal for himself; “and I trow thou wilt open thine eyes wide to see what he will consume. Think, good madam, I have been out since early morn, and have been lost in the depths of the forest, knowing not where I was. I had laid me down to die, or till Heaven sent me help; and it was not long in coming neither. Holy St. Thomas himself appeared; and here am I a starving pr—lad, asking hospitality at thy friendly board.”

“Come in, come in,” answered the mother, leading the way. “In truth thou art welcome to all our poor house contains. But what will thy companions think if they find thee not? Shall we send to the castle—”

“Nay, nay; send not at all. Madcap Hal will ne'er be missed. He knows well enough how to take care of himself. He has given them the slip before now, and turned up safe and sound. Give me only food and drink, and I will refuse you nothing—to the half of my kingdom!”

The boy's laugh rang out gaily as he followed Mary into the mill; but Edgar stood very still for several minutes, gazing after him, wrapt in thought.

CHAPTER XI.

A BAND OF BOYS.

“**N**OW, show me everything,” cried Hal, springing up from the table, where he had certainly done yeoman service as a trencher-man, and had fulfilled his threat of astonishing his hosts by the excellence of his appetite. “I was never in a mill before; but, by my halidom, it is a fine place to call home. I would learn all that it has to teach. Tell me how yon great wheel works, and show me the hatches and sluices, and I know not what besides, of which ye speak; I would learn everything of the business of a miller. There is nothing in the wide world that I would not fain learn, an I had the time.”

“A good wish without doubt,” spoke John Beetel, who had been studying his youthful guest with some attention, and had been as much struck as was Edgar with that self-possession, that air of unconscious command, and that audacious merriment of demeanour that was so striking in a mere boy. Moreover, Jack had whispered to his father that this was the very youth who had flung the rose-rials to the players on May-day, and whose sumptu-

ous apparel and boldness of bearing had struck the whole town. It had never been known who the stranger was. He was a guest at Lord Leston's house, and beyond that none knew aught; but there had been a feeling throughout the place that there was some mystery attaching to the stranger, and it was declared of a certainty that he must be the son of some very great noble.

Yet here he was, seated at the miller's board, chatting and laughing with the miller's family, insisting upon being addressed as Hal, and seemingly more interested in water-wheels, hatches, and sluices than in anything in the world besides. It was quite a pleasure to the miller to show the workings of his mill to such an attentive and intelligent questioner. It seemed to him wonderful how this boy grasped the point of each process demonstrated, and how quick he was to pick out the gist of the matter under discussion. He only laughed when he was complimented upon his intelligence, and answered carelessly that he was meant by nature for a jack-of-all-trades, and that knowledge never came amiss.

But he never for a moment let slip from his mind the question of the water supply for the mill, and asked a number of questions of the miller respecting the upper stream and its tributary, and what was done when the flow of water was too great.

John Beutel explained to him that there was a hatch in the upper tributary, where the dam had been made to guard the water from leaping over towards the cleft in the hillside, and that if there were too great volume of water

coming down, this hatch was set open—though it had not been used now for a great while, lest the prior should make some new demand about the water, and a new trouble arise therefrom.

Hal's eyes brightened as he heard of this hatch, and he flashed a look at Edmund, which the latter was not slow to understand. Thanking John Beetel for the explanation given, he threw a merry glance in the direction of the twins, and, with a hand upon the shoulder of each, he cried,—

“Now let us go and survey this upper stream, where the dam has been set and the old hatch still stands. I would see it all with mine own eyes, so we will go thither incontinently.”

He laughed aloud in his boisterous way, and waved his hat to Mary, who stood watching them from her doorway.

“Good mother,” he said, “I like thy house and thy sons and thy good cheer so well that I would fain beg a night's hospitality of thee, if thou canst make shift to give it to a nameless stranger, who comes with nothing to offer in exchange for such a grace as he has the boldness to crave.”

Mary made him a reverence as she answered,—

“No wayfarer craving food or shelter is ever turned from these doors, fair sir—least of all a gallant gentleman like yourself, whose quality cannot be hidden, bear he never so plain a name.”

The boy laughed and made his bow.

“I have heard many a finer compliment that pleased me

much less, kind hostess ; and give me such a supper as you gave me dinner, and you will find you have entertained a guest who will come yet again for such good cheer."

The boys went off together, laughing ; the miller and his wife stood looking at each other.

"Who can he be ?" quoth Mary ; but the miller shook his head, saying, after a pause for thought,—

"It may be better not to question too closely when the great men of the earth choose to go masquerading, but it was said of this lad in the town that day, that a king's son could not hold himself more royally, nor show more princely spirit."

A little vague alarm showed itself in Mary's eyes. It was too big a thought for her to grasp.

"He must be the son of some great noble, methinks. They say Lord Leston is much at court, and knows the great ones of the land. 'Tis strange the liking he hath taken to our boys ; and yet, why not ? Is not one of them fit to sit with princes, should the time for it come ?"

Meantime the boys were climbing the heights towards the bed of the tributary stream over whose course there was so much dispute and hot feeling.

"Zounds ! Does the prior think to rob an honest man like your father of the fruits of his toil ?" cried Hal in his heady way, anger, scorn, and contemptuous amusement struggling for mastery in his voice. "These haughty prelates think that all the world is made for them and for their fat and lazy following of idle monks. I trow the day will come when they shall find themselves in a place

they reckon not of. Are honest millers like your father to spend their hardly-earned gold as he hath done in making such a mill as the one he showed me, and is he to be robbed of the fruits of his toil, because, forsooth, my lord prior would rule the world his own way, and drag into his greedy maw everything he can lay hand on, by might if not by right? Methinks my lord prior is in need of a lesson; and, by the mass, if we give him not one ere another day dawn, call me not Hal of—”

He stopped and laughed, and quickened his speed, till soon they had reached the point for which they aimed, and the boy's eyes were searching everywhere for the things he sought to find.

Sure enough the old hatch was there, almost embedded in the strong dam that had been made, and evidently, as John Beetel had said, it had not been opened for many a year.

Hal looked eagerly over the embankment, seeking to mark how the water would flow if permitted to leave the regular bed at this point. It was plain, by the broken nature of the ground around, that either some winter storms or some rather recent convulsion of nature had torn up the hillside a good deal, and had made this damming in of the stream into its original channel a matter of common prudence.

“Edmund, go thy way down yonder, and signal to us where the chasm is which the monks are enlarging and driving upwards for their nefarious purpose. If we are to aid these good folks in their search after water, we must

needs know that we shall do it with good effect. We will wait here for thy signal, and then join thee. I would see with mine own eyes the fall of the ground."

Edmund obeyed instantly. It occurred to none of them as strange that the new-comer, the youngest of the three, should thus take the lead. He gave orders without arrogance, yet as one born to command; and the others obeyed without a thought, scarcely realizing that they did obey.

Hal turned to Edgar, still leaning over the embankment, and watching the quiet swirl of the river past it.

"You have many comrades and friends in the town, I doubt not?"

"Yes, plenty," answered Edgar readily.

"Could you make shift to gather together a band of perhaps a dozen this night," he asked, "to meet us here at this spot, and to bring with them certain implements and tools, of which we will speak more particularly anon?"

Into Edgar's eyes there flashed a look of eager wonder and inquiry, and his words came fast and free.

"Why, I trow yes. The days are long; the lads meet for sport in the meadows without the walls after the day's work is done. We could get easy speech of them. They would follow Edmund anywhere. And if they thought there was some sport afoot—sport for my lord prior and his monks—why, they would come with a right merry heart, and there would be small chiding from fathers and mothers at home, even were they to remain without the walls all night."

“Marry, that is well, that is very well, for there will be no return this night. But by break of day I trust we shall have given such a lesson to my lord prior as he will not soon forget. Ha! there is Edmund’s signal. See that white kerchief bound upon his staff. Nay, but the moles have worked their way well. They are scarce a stone’s-throw from the dam. Doubtless this night they look to complete their task, and to open the dam upon the morrow. It might well be that my lord prior himself should come to see the night’s work ere break of day. Kind saints send him hither! Such a welcome shall he have as he will not soon forget. And hark ye, boy Edgar, is there any comrade of yours in the town who could pick us up news from the priory?”

“I have a cousin who has friends within the walls. He is as sharp as a tailor’s needle, and a good one for scenting out news.”

“Marry, that is good hearing!” cried Hal. “Then, friend Edgar, delay no longer, but hie thee to this same cousin and to the lads of the town. Tell them not too much, yet enough to bring them here by moonrise; and let them come stealthily, armed with spade and pick, shovel and mattock, and such tools as will be needed to open yon hatch that has been closed these many years. Tell them that we are to give the prior a lesson, and I trow that they will come right willingly. I like well the spirit of your townfolk; men who will fight for their charter and their rights will fight for king and country should cause arise.”

Edgar understood sufficient of the matter in hand to

send him dashing merrily down the hillside, followed by Hal's resonant voice, as he called after him,—

“And bid your cousin of the long ears seek news at the priory whether my lord prior purposes to leave the walls this night, for we must not be without a right warm welcome for so noble a guest.”

And laughing loudly at his own jest, the boy Hal plunged down and joined Edmund in the quarry-like cleft where the monks had been at work for so long.

He looked around him with keen curiosity and interest.

“These moles burrow well when they have a mind to it. How the fat fellows must have puffed and sweated at their toil! Well, well, hard work hurts no man—least of all a frowzy monk. How close they have gotten to the dam! By my troth, they will be ready to pierce it right soon now; and the dam once broken down would be mighty hard to repair, I take it, since the storms have so torn the ground away. Now, Edmund, we will have a pleasant surprise for them this night. Dost read my purpose, good lad? The monks shall get water sooner than they think of. They shall have for once in their lives a right good fright. They shall think that the dam has burst bodily, and that they will be swept away in the torrent, prior and all.”

Edmund flung his cap into the air. He had guessed at the proposed plan, but had not worked out the details as Hal had done.

“’Twill be as easy as lying,” quoth the latter. “Edgar has already started for the town, and will bring back with

him a band of boys. Whilst their parents think them sporting in the meadows at close of day, they will be here with us, making shift to clear away the rubbish and the slime and the weeds, that the hatch may once again be opened and closed at will. Thy mother shall be our friend, and shall give us one such noble pasty as I have partaken of once this day; the savour of it yet clings to my gullet," and the lad smacked his lips. "And after the work is done, we will lay ourselves down in fern and moss and rest awhile, and listen to the coming and the toil of the worthy moles down here. We will have our spies to watch them; we will know whether or not my lord prior shall come, and when; and if it be that he will visit them ere their task ends, at that moment we will prepare our watery welcome for his reverence."

"You will open the hatch?" cried Edmund, his eyes aglow.

"Why, what else?" laughed Hal. "Shall they not have water? Shall not their efforts be crowned with success after such toil? Verily the worthy fellows shall have water and to spare for once in their lives. I wager they will swallow more this night than they do in a twelvemonth within cloister walls!" and Hal threw back his head and laughed with uproarious mirth.

"But and if we drown the lord prior or some of his monks?" asked Edmund, when the laugh was ended.

Hal shrugged his shoulders and made a slight grimace.

"Methinks the country can spare a monk or two without missing them," he answered. "Why trouble our heads

anent so small a matter? Surely the saints can look after their patrons here on earth, an they have a mind to."

This easy flippancy rather disconcerted Edmund.

"But we shall have to answer for it to the prior, I trow."

"Right gladly will I do so," answered Hal, throwing back his head and breaking into his loudest laugh. "By the mass, I ask nothing better. Arraigned to answer for my misdeeds by the prior of Gadhelm! By the beard of St. Anthony, I would I had my comrades here to see!"

Edmund said no more. He was boy enough to delight in the promised prank, and man enough to feel a certain stern pleasure in so outwitting and discomfiting the disturber of the peace of the town. Hal led him back towards the mill, talking and laughing loudly all the while; and when he boldly informed the miller and his wife that he and his good comrades, as he termed Edmund and Edgar, had decided to play foresters in the wood for the night, and craved a supply of provisions for themselves and some few who would join them, no remonstrance was addressed to him by either. But Mary hurried away to look to the contents of her larder, and to find such good things as might be acceptable to the young lord and his friends; for she not unnaturally supposed that he was to be joined by a party from Lord Leston's castle, and she was willing and eager to give of her best for their entertainment.

Hal's eyes sparkled as he saw the provision provided by good Mary, and he and Edmund laded themselves willingly enough with the well-stocked panniers.

"We will return after daybreak with a tale to tell," cried he, waving his hand in farewell with something of a courtly grace; and again John and his wife exchanged glances, wondering what manner of guest this might be.

The boys bore their load back by easy stages to the appointed trysting-place, and sat down to talk. Hal drew from Edmund the story of his life, and hearing how he had learned from Lord James certain martial exercises, he sprang up, and cutting two staves of equal length, challenged his companion to a fencing bout, to show somewhat of his skill at thrust and parry.

Edmund was the taller of the pair, but Hal was of extraordinary strength of build, and it was soon abundantly evident that his skill in the art of fence and swordsmanship was considerable.

Edmund soon felt that he had more than met his match in the younger lad. At the same time he showed such quickness and address that his antagonist called out in approval and admiration many times; and when finally he had caught Edmund's stave by a neat turn of the wrist, and had sent it flying through the air in a graceful curve, leaving his antagonist unarmed, he flung himself down, laughing, on the ground, crying out,—

"Well done, honest Edmund! By my halidom, if our burghers' sons can wield so good a sword, we need never fear for war. We could equip an army from our citizens, trained ere they took the field."

"Truly, sir," answered Edmund, "we seek to exercise ourselves in martial sports and the use of arms; albeit my

own poor skill is something greater than some possess, through the kindness of the Lord James Fitzgerald, who took pains with me and my brother."

"And none know better how to wield sword and spear than the house of bold Kildare!" cried Hal; and Edmund gave him a quick glance, for he had said nothing of Kildare, yet this youth knew at once that Kildare and Fitzgerald were one.

But now a trampling of feet made itself heard, and up came Edgar with his eager band of boys. He had said enough to them to stir their curiosity to the utmost, and they came like young crusaders, all alert and full of zeal.

Hal eyed the lads as they clustered round him, scanning his face, and by their looks questioning who he was, though their tongues failed to frame the question. There was something in the aspect and bearing of the youthful stranger that, whilst inspiring liking and respect, quenched undue familiarity. He took the place of leader as by natural right, and they accorded it to him without comment or question.

They had not come unarmed, these lads from the town, some of whom were older than Edgar, and had almost the stature and strength of men. They had brought the needful tools, but they had weapons beside. Some rumour of possible collision betwixt themselves and the monks had run through their ranks, and it had seemed well to come provided against emergency.

Hal gathered the band together at the dam where the old hatch was, and briefly stated his purpose. Before

nightfall came, and with it the monks to complete their work, that hatch must be in working order, so that it could be opened at any moment, to let a flood of water pour down upon the "moles" at their nefarious underground toil. Whilst some of the boys were to work at this, a few others were to dig such a channel as should carry the volume of escaped water straight to the head of the chasm, where it would leap down with all its force upon the workers below, without losing any of its volume on the way.

Laughter and cheers greeted the unfolding of this plan, and with all possible zest the boys set to work. Although they were only lads varying in age from fourteen to perhaps twenty or over, they lacked neither strength nor skill. Many of them had been apprenticed to some craft at the age of ten or even under. Some had already passed through the period of apprenticeship, and were enrolled as craftsmen of some city guild. They could one and all handle tool or weapon with a certain skill and strength, and Hal stood watching them with approving eyes as they set themselves to work, scrutinizing keenly everything that was done, and asking a host of questions as to the why and the wherefore.

Just before the sun dipped finally behind the hill there came up a youth who seemed somewhat older than the band of workers, a youth neither tall of stature nor with any special look of strength, but with a face that twinkled all over with a sort of shrewd merriment, and eyes which looked as though nothing escaped them.

“Our cousin Peter,” cried Edgar, presenting him to Hal—“he who went to seek news from the priory. From his look I doubt not that he has got it.”

“Excellent news, i’ faith,” cried Peter, whose quick wits had bridged all gaps in Edgar’s narrative, and who had already made a shrewd guess as to what was likely to happen in the woods that night. “My lord prior comes himself to-night, or rather at the first streak of day, to see the progress of the work; and if it be that he thinks the right moment be come, he will give the order for the piercing of the dam. It is whispered all through the priory by this time that naught can hinder them now from gaining their point, though they know not that one single whisper has gone forth outside their walls.”

“And how comes it that thou dost learn secrets so readily?” asked Hal with a laugh.

Peter’s shrewd eyes half closed in a knowing expression.

“My father, I would have you know, good sir, doth keep an excellent cellar of wine; and because that I am favoured by my mother, she does get me thence from time to time a bottle of the best. Now there is an excellent lay-brother within the walls who loves me and the rare wine well; and when we need news from the priory, I and my bottle go a-visiting at his lodge, for he is keeper of the gate, and when the wine is in him all else comes freely forth, and so in all good fellowship I learn what I would know, if so be that the honest fellow himself is acquaint with it.”

Hal laughed heartily; and Peter, with something of

an air, produced from a leather pouch at his side a bottle which he presented with a bow to the stranger.

"If you would favour us by your opinion upon the wine in question, it would greatly please us all."

Hal laughed as he took the bottle, and vowed that they would all drink to the success of their venture, when once the work was done, and they could lie at ease amid the fern and moss watching and listening for their cloistered foes' approach.

And indeed before darkness had come all was in readiness. The rusty bolts of the hatch could be drawn and refixed at will, and the slime and weeds that had choked it for so long had all been carefully cleared away. They had so far opened and shut it that they were sure they would find no obstruction in throwing it wide, and the narrow channel to guide the course of the water at its first escape had been already made by the younger boys under Edmund's direction.

Now the moon was riding as high in the sky as mid-summer moon ever can ride, and the forest was full of whispering sounds and of flickering lights and shadows.

The boys, pleasantly wearied with their work, yet wide awake and eager for the sequel, lay about at ease in a little mossy dell, and fell with a right good will upon the excellent fare that Mary Beetel had provided for them. Peter had been set as a scout, and till he came back with the news of any approach from the priory, they chatted and laughed, told tales and sang songs at will; but no tales were so eagerly listened to as those

of the stranger boy Hal, who spoke of the great world without their town boundaries as of one who knew it well, and so graphic were his portraits of men and things that the lads held their breath to listen, and Edmund felt his heart swell within him in the desire to go forth and see such things for himself.

But presently the warning cry of an owl, thrice repeated, told them that their trusty scout had seen something, and instantly dead silence fell upon the group. A little later and Peter joined them, his news imparted in a cautious whisper.

“They are coming, a goodly band. They laugh and jest like men when victory is assured. They have lanterns with them and full wallets. I reckon that they mean to stay till the work is done, and the prior comes forth to see and complete the task. Now may we lie and hear the moles at work; but let us be cautious, for they have sharp eyes and ears, and are full of suspicion and guile.”

Silence therefore fell upon the band of boys lying hid in the fern and moss, and soon their ears were assailed by the sound of steps and voices, and after a brief pause by the noise of pick and shovel and spade, as the unseen workers in the chasm beneath set to their night's toil.

The boys exchanged nudges and laughing or angry looks. Edmund's heart was burning within him, for he realized how severe was the blow so nearly inflicted upon the prosperity of his father—a blow that would have rendered abortive all the thrifty toil of many past years,

and have been something like the ruin of that business he had so carefully built up for himself and those who would come after.

They had plenty of time to think, for some hours must elapse before the first streak of dawn in the sky would bring the prior, and with him the crucial moment for which they waited. Some of the lads dozed and slumbered in the warm, still night air; others crept from time to time to the edge of the chasm, and gazed down at the gowned figures below engaged in their toil.

It was a strange sight, and fascinated the eyes of Hal and the twins, who accompanied him. They were quite safe from detection, and could see well what went on below; yet once they started violently, and almost exclaimed aloud, for something stirred in the grass beside them, and a strange wild-looking head was raised, and a pair of gleaming eyes gazed full upon them.

"Hist! 'tis a friend! 'tis Wild Will!" whispered Edmund, catching Hal by the arm, for he saw the battle light flame into his eyes as he thought themselves discovered by a spy.

Hal laughed silently and dropped his hand.

"Marry, thou dost well call him a wild fellow, a son of the woods. I had not believed a man could thus hide himself in the ground and rise out of it as a snake doth. Bid him come and tell me of himself. I would know somewhat more of him."

The monks were engrossed in their task. The forest rang with the sound of their tools; they seemed to feel

that caution was at an end. Their task was wellnigh accomplished. The boys did not fear now to talk, or to listen to Wild Will's strange tales of the woods. He held them entranced till the day began to redden in the east, and Peter came back from the point of vantage whither he had betaken himself with the news that the prior was on his way.

"Now saints be praised for sending him!" cried Hal, springing to his feet. "To your posts every man of you, and wait for the signal! Edmund and Edgar, come ye with me, and Peter of the sharp eyes also. We will watch; and look the rest of you for the flutter of the white flag. Then do your work."

The boys were on their feet in an instant, eager and alert. All had been planned in detail beforehand. Each knew his appointed task. Wild Will's eyes were dancing in his head. If he had no cause greatly to love the burghers, he hated the monks still worse. They had done him many an ill turn, and he knew they had ever their eyes upon his mother, hoping one day to burn her as a witch.

Hal's eyes seemed to catch an answering gleam. He gripped his comrades by the arms, and together they slid through the grass, almost as silently as Will himself, till they found themselves once more looking down into the place where the monks were at work, and they heard the cry raised by them,—

"The lord prior comes! the lord prior comes!"

CHAPTER XII.

"THE KING'S SON."

THE monks turned at the cry, and dropped their tools to do honour to their superior, who came with measured step, attended by his sub-prior and a few others, looking about him with keen, watchful eyes, his cowl thrown back, his black eyes and scowling brows showing clear and plain in the light of the lanterns and torches.

Even his words came clearly up to the ears of the listening boys above,—

"Marry, ye have well worked and well done. I know this place. It is close to yon dam that the miller of Hascombe has built against the kind work Dame Nature has sought to do for us. But with the first ray of sunlight that dam shall fall, and we will have water, water, water and to spare!"

There was a little movement in the bushes above, but the monks saw it not—saw not the flutter of a few white kerchiefs—for they were clustered about the prior, showing their work, and receiving his praise for their zeal.

The boys craning over from above were fairly shaking now in the passion of suppressed excitement. Suddenly a

wild yell rose from Hal, who sprang to his feet and shouted wildly,—

"Ay, my lord prior, you shall have your wish. You shall have water, water, water and to spare. See how it leaps to meet and greet your holiness! A miracle! a miracle, good folks! See how the lord prior hath but to will it, and water springs from the rock at his word!"

With cries of astonishment and terror the monks started apart and gazed upwards; then indeed they saw an appalling sight—a great curling mass of falling water that leaped, as it seemed to them, from the very clouds above upon their heads. It was useless to seek safety in flight; already the water was crashing and dashing down upon them, overturning them in the rocky prison whither they had come to work, carrying them off their feet, hurling them hither and thither in the wild irresponsible way of water when it falls from a height and breaks into a thousand eddies of spray and foam ere it finds its level and races downwards and along its course.

And above the fall of the water, and the yells of the terrified monks, came loud laughter and mocking voices from above, that seemed to them as the laughter of the demons of the wood.

"A miracle! a miracle! The lord prior has called for water, and, lo, the water has come at his bidding! A miracle, in very truth! See how it leaps upon the prior! see how it swirls around him! In sooth, a very pretty miracle. Hast had enough and to spare of water yet, good my lord prior?"

A panic of terror seized upon the monks, who thought nothing less than that the whole dam had given way, and that the evil one himself had brought this premature destruction upon it to their ruin and confusion. Had this indeed been so, had the whole dam burst, not a monk would have escaped with his life. But the volume of water escaping through the sluice gate was of course only a small part of the flow, and though it came with considerable force, falling from so great a height, sweeping the monks from their foothold, and dashing them about in the narrow channel in which they were temporarily penned, there was neither depth nor volume enough to drown them; and after five or six minutes of choking and blind fighting, and of such fear as only comes to men thus taken by surprise and confronted by what they think to be a far worse peril, they began to scramble out of the course of the torrent one by one, shaking the water from their gowns, aiding one another to their feet, and asking wild, startled questions as to the nature of the mishap.

The prior was one of the first to recover both his footing and his presence of mind. He saw the dancing, triumphant forms upon the higher ground; they stood revealed in the first clear light of the summer's dawn. He knew that they were not demons of the forest, though that they were emissaries of the devil in another sense he most fully believed.

"This is some artifice of the burghers!" he cried, as his followers mustered round him. "Take your arms, brethren, and follow me. We will teach them a lesson yet—the in-

solent knaves! Do they think to treat us thus with impunity?"

Rage was in the heart of the prior, rage was in the hearts of his monks; nor did their rage decrease when they noted that so soon as they had all scrambled out of the torrent, cut and bruised and wet to the skin as they were, the flow of the water ceased as suddenly as it had come, showing that what had happened had been a clever trick perpetrated upon them by some who had discovered the nature of their work, and were resolved to frustrate it, or to know the reason why. If the burghers were resolved to protect the dam, what chance would there be of piercing it?

"This is some scurvy trick of the burghers!" cried the furious prior, as, finding the narrow pathway, he headed his men and dashed upwards. He did not lack in courage, this black-browed ecclesiastic. He was armed, it is true, as were most of the monks, though some had lost their arms in their fright. Still most of them carried a weapon in their belt, and knew how to use it if need arose.

Drawn up on the little plateau above was a band of about a score of boys, the faces of most of whom were known to the prior. Foremost, however, was one whose face was certainly not that of a burgher citizen, and yet as the prior looked he seemed within himself to know the face, and to have seen it elsewhere.

But anger and fury kept him from further inquiry now; he strode rapidly towards the little band, and asked in a voice of thunder,—

"Whose doing is this, ye idle vagabonds? Do ye think to set me at defiance thus? Have I no prisons for such evil workers? Is Holy Church thus to be defied and railed upon by worthless 'prentice boys and craftsmen? And come ye armed, too? This will be a pretty tale for his majesty's ears. Lay down your arms every one of you; else the first one I take I hang over the gate, let the burghers rage as they will!"

"Say you so, my lord prior!" cried the foremost youth—he of the ruddy countenance and the strange face. "Then know that I am he who planned this thing, and with the aid of yon brave burgher boys have carried it out. It was told me that your holiness required water, water, water and to spare," mimicking openly the voice and words of the prior, "and I have made shift to give you what you asked. And instead of gratitude we get vehement abuse. How is that, my lord?"

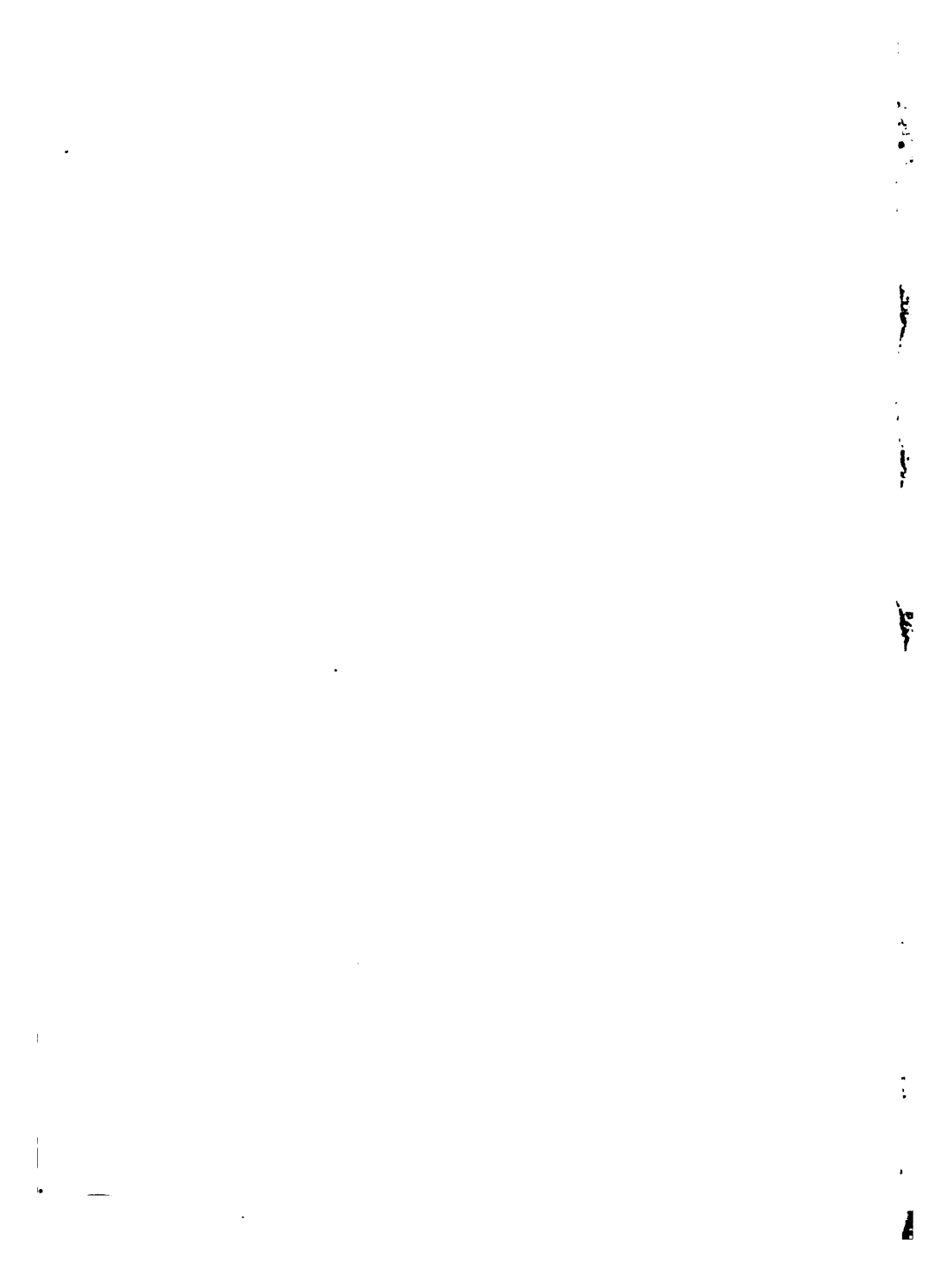
"Thou shalt see how that is, thou insolent popinjay!" shouted the prior, springing forward. "And, by the mass, whosoever thou art, thou shalt pay for thy night's sport right dearly.—Monks, seize him! bind him! Carry him into the town! I will hang him there over mine own gate for the townsmen's breakfast!"

Fury had possessed the prior—that sort of fury which is really deadly and dangerous, and which leads men to perpetrate deeds of rash violence from which they would recoil in a more sober moment. The boys recoiled for an instant before it, all but the one boy addressed, who stood his ground with a smile upon his face—a smile that



"Lay hands upon me at your peril."

Page 215.



so enraged the heady prior that he advanced yet nearer, and made as though he would strike the lad in the face; only there suddenly flashed from his eyes such a fiery glance that he for a moment recoiled in his turn.

"Have a care, my lord prior," cried the boy in a quiet but strangely resonant tone; "have a care, you fat and frowzy monks. Lay hands upon me at your peril, any one of you. A jest I forgive, but take heed ye carry it not too far. I am the king's son!"

They fell back from him one and all, burgher boys as well as monks, some in terror and dismay, some in astonishment and a species of awed rapture.

"I knew it! I knew it!" cried Edgar, finding his voice first, and springing forward to throw himself upon one knee before the prince. "I knew that only a king's son could speak and act with such a kingly mien."

The prior knew now where he had seen that square, ruddy face; and he shook in his shoes, whilst his monks trembled and cowered behind him. Young Henry was now the Prince of Wales, the heir to the crown of England, since the recent death of his brother Arthur. It was indeed no light matter to offend the only son of the great king, now so firmly established on the throne. Impotent rage and a deadly fear struggled together in the prior's breast. To abase himself before these burgher boys was gall and wormwood to him; but would it not be worse to find himself frowned upon by the monarch, who was said to regard young Henry as the apple of his eye?

With all the smoothness and address that he possessed,

he sought to counteract the unfavourable impression he had made upon the young prince. Drawing near, he bent the knee—a most unaccustomed act for him—and said with a smile,—

“Ten thousand pardons, most sweet prince. I pray you take it as a tribute to your grace’s most excellent masquerade that I should be thus deceived. Yet I pray you have a care, my liege, for your companions are not worthy the honour you have done them. Deign to be my guest for a while, where I promise you the best that the place can afford, and I will lay before you the merits of the whole case, the other side of which you have doubtless heard, and I will prove to you without gainsaying that we are in the right in this matter as to the water, and that yon insolent burghers and their yet more insolent sons are the defrauders of Holy Church, and the disturbers of that peace and security which your noble father’s rule has brought to happy England.”

He cast a venomous look at the town boys as he spoke, his eyes flashing with a look of dire hatred, despite the smoothness of his speech. Young Henry gazed at him with his bold fearlessness, and throwing back his head, answered,—

“Then, my lord prior, if your cause is so good an one, why come ye at night like evil spirits to do your work? I have been told the Scriptures declare that it is the evil-doers who walk in darkness and love not the light, because their deeds are evil. Tell me, is it so set down in holy writ? And if so, why work ye in the darkness rather than the light?”

"We are men of peace, fair prince," answered the prior, "and as such we seek to avoid strife and combat. Knowing the evil temper of the wily and crafty townsmen, we have to use guile towards them. You have seen for yourself—"

"Oh ay, I have seen for myself right well, good my lord prior. I have seen you monks, you men of peace, come rushing up with arms in your hands, ready to slay and take captive, and hang without shadow of trial, the sons of honest citizens who are protecting their own rights and meeting guile with guile, trick with trick. I have seen you advance against your king's son, and offer to strike him, whilst you threaten to hang him. A man of peace, in fair sooth, my lord prior of Gadhelm!"

The fire flashed from young Henry's eyes. The spirit of his later years was there in the boy, though indulgence and evil passions had not yet given it that ferocity which made him a terror to his court and kingdom at last. But even now, though it was in part a generous anger, there was something terrible in the look upon his young face; and the prior trembled as he gazed and listened, whilst the monks shrank away in ill-suppressed fear.

"I crave ten thousand pardons for my error, your grace," said the prior, seeking to veil his uneasiness beneath a mask of calm dignity. "In the half light, and blinded as I was by water, and confused by the blows I had received, I may be pardoned, I trust, for my error. Who could guess that the king's son should be in such a place at such a time? It is the prerogative of royalty to show mercy to

unwitting offenders, therefore I pray your pardon with a good conscience."

"Good conscience quotha!" cried Prince Henry, with something between a laugh and a snort. "An excellent good conscience, in all sooth! Hark ye, my lord prior. You have asked pardon for yourself and yon craven herd of monks. I must take time to consider this matter, and how I report of it to my lord the king. Wherefore I bid you meet me at noon this day in the Guild Hall of the town, and there will I tell you what I have decided, and we will speak further anent this same matter. If you have aught to show respecting your claim for this water, bring then your parchments, and I will consider them. It is time there were an end to this unseemly strife; and I, the king's son, will be judge of the same this day at noon. Be you there with your following."

"Then deign, in the interim, sweet prince, to be my guest," pleaded the prior, whose face bore the stamp of deep perturbation; "and if you will condescend to look into this matter, let judgment, I pray you, be given in my hall of judgment, whither we can summon the mayor and burgesses—"

The prior stopped short, for Prince Henry's brows had drawn sharply together, and his eyes shot forth that angry light which few who saw ever forgot.

"You have heard my words, Sir Prior. You will meet me to-day at noon in the Guild Hall of the town. I have spoken. It is for you to obey. Begone with your following. I have no more to say to you now. Remember

how you have threatened your king's son, and begone; and have a care how you provoke me further, lest I remember it against you to my father."

In deep mortification, rage, and fear the prior made his reverence, and turned and went without another word. The monks crowded in his wake like a flock of frightened sheep.

Prince Henry, with the boys clustered about him, stood watching this retreat with frowning brows; but as the last monk disappeared down the hillside his mood changed, and he broke into a hearty laugh, in which, after a moment's hesitation, his comrades joined.

"Come," he said, taking Edmund by the arm, and looking round at the rest, "come, friends and comrades. We have had a right merry morning, and there is yet sport before us for the day. We will bring yon proud prior to his senses yet. But my stomach cries 'Breakfast, breakfast!' and so take me home first to thy mother, good friend, and let me be fed, and get a snatch of sleep upon some bed, and I will meet you all, with your fathers and the burgesses, in the Guild Hall an hour before noon, and we will have such a reception ready for my lord prior as shall make the blood tingle in his veins."

The boys could not be other than at ease with the prince. His jovial ways drove away fear and the first awe that had fallen upon them. They all laughed aloud at the recollection of the scene in the chasm, as the water came leaping down upon the hapless monks; and Henry gave praise for the quickness and dexterity that had been

shown by his band of boys, and slapped them on the back, calling them "right trusty knaves."

The town boys were all in a ferment to get back to their homes, to tell the news in the town, and to make ready a fitting reception for the prince. When their paths diverged, they went off in an excited phalanx, whilst Edmund and Edgar betook themselves to the mill with the prince, who, after doing his customary justice to an excellent breakfast, flung himself down upon the softest bed the house could provide him, and in ten minutes was sound asleep, leaving the excited twins to tell the tale of the night's adventure to the miller, his wife, and his son.

"The king's son!" The news flew like wildfire through the town. The king's son had come amongst them, and had taken up the quarrel against the prior, and would that day settle the matter for good and all! The story of the night's adventure flew from mouth to mouth. It told well the part the prince was likely to play, and where his sympathies were. The mayor and his councillors assembled together, and hasty preparations were made for a great banquet to be given in honour of the prince as soon as the business was settled. The hall was draped with cloth as upon great state occasions, the citizens hung flags and bright-hued stuffs from their windows, the children ran out into the woods and marshes for flowers and willow boughs, and before the sun was high in the sky all Gadhelm was dressed in its best, and the town looked as though it had arrayed itself for some joyous holiday.

And in truth there was joy and gladness in all faces.

The king's son had come as their champion against their traditionary foe. Was not that cause enough for rejoicing? It was felt by all that this day might prove one of lasting victory to the town. The proud prelate had been encroaching and encroaching, threatening and fighting, till they knew no end to his exactions; but to-day would see a check put to his power, and give them a protector who might afterwards be appealed to. It was reasonable that all hearts should be glad, and that laughter and song should be heard in the streets, as the tale was told of what the prince and the band of burgher boys had done. It was shrewdly felt that the personal favour of the Prince of Wales would be more to the town than the judgment of any court, or written mandate from the king himself.

The craftsmen vied with one another in the selection of some fitting gift for their royal visitor and champion. The saddlers produced a beautiful equipment for a rider, with saddle and bridle and trappings all complete, the workmanship of the best that was then known to English craftsmen. The armourers brought weapons finely tempered and chased; the silversmiths, a goblet richly embossed, with the figures overlaid with gold. The mercers were not backward in producing a gorgeous mantle of velvet trimmed with fur; and even the hosiers were represented by several pairs of shoes of fashionable make, embroidered in gold and silver thread in cunning patterns of leaves and flowers.

Then, shortly before the hour at which the prince was looked for, up came Cuthbert Pastern leading by a halter

a fine young horse, bred by his father from an excellent stock, and lately broken to rein and spur. Edmund and Edgar had been riding and training the beautiful creature for some months past, and when the crowd at the door saw the dainty barb led up, and guessed the reason why, a cheer went up from the whole assembly, and quickly the saddle and bridle were brought out and put on, the glossy coat was polished by willing hands till it shone anew, and with the rich cloak and a pair of shining spurs thrown lightly over the saddle, the procession started forth towards the gate by which the prince must enter the town.

Punctuality is accounted a royal virtue, and young Henry was at the gate upon the stroke of eleven. He came on foot, attended by Edmund and Edgar, and followed by his band of the night, most of whom had sallied forth to meet him and bring him in.

Cheer upon cheer went up as the people saw him, and recognized the gay lad who had been present in their midst on May-day, though then unknown to them.

Henry laughed and plucked the cap from off his head, and made his bows with a ready grace and friendliness, his eyes sparkling with boyish glee as the mayor in his robes led up the beautiful horse in its gay trappings, and prayed the prince to accept the gift from his loyal subjects and servants of Gadhelm.

"I' faith, and that I will, good people; and I thank you heartily for your goodwill and hearty welcome!" cried the prince, as he sprang lightly into the saddle, Edmund holding his stirrup. "A fine creature, in all sooth, and finely

caparisoned. I thank you, good people; I thank you heartily, one and all."

With shouting and acclamation the prince was led through the decorated streets, and right noble did he look as he sat upon the horse, bowing right and left as the wives and children of the citizens pelted him with flowers from their windows, and shouted his name with blessings as he moved along. He felt the warmth and enthusiasm of the people, and it struck a responsive chord in his heart. He was well used to set pageants and shows of loyal love, but he recognized the spontaneous element in his reception here; and even though the townspeople might have an interested motive in their joy at seeing the prince thus in their midst, the joy itself was genuine and hearty, and was in part the enthusiasm which the strong personality of the boy himself evoked.

It was a stately though a simple progress, and Henry at last entered the gaily-decked hall and took the chair of state that had been set for him in the centre of the raised dais, the mayor's place being now at his right hand, and that reserved for the prior at his left.

Henry, robed in the long mantle, and wearing some of the gifts of the townfolk, such as a fine plumed hat, a pair of grand buckled shoes, and a deep lace collar over his plain doublet, made a very kingly figure in their midst. He listened with great attention to the statements of the mayor and burgesses, and John Beetel the miller, respecting the water question and the rights of the upper stream, and his own common-sense and shrewdness told him that these

men were in the right, and that the prior had no claim upon the water that he sought to divert from its old channel.

The hour of noon had hardly boomed forth ere the prior appeared in all the stately pomp that ecclesiastics displayed upon great occasions, and he swept up to his place in the hall with a dignified mien, though it was difficult for him to dissemble his rage and hatred as he saw young Henry surrounded by his foes.

In truth the prior had but a sorry case to plead when stripped of its high-sounding phrases; and all that he could allege in defence of his recent action was that he had obtained from Lord Hascombe a letter, which he produced, wherein it was set down that if on his return the earl found that the prior's rights had been infringed by the burghers, he would seek to set the matter right and give the monks their due. The prior urged that the earl's return was delayed and delayed, till at last he had taken the spirit of the letter as his text, and had acted on his own responsibility.

"Ay, my lord prior, methinks you take something too much upon yourself. You dared to threaten with summary death, in my very hearing, the sons of these honest citizens, whose only offence was a spirited protection of their own rights. You may have powers of life and death over certain persons who come for judgment in your own courts, but who gave you powers over these citizen lads? They were not on church land, they had committed no crime nor shadow of crime; yet you were ready—ay, deny it as you will, you were ready to set upon them

with your monks, double in number, and to hang one or more of them ere the city was awake, though you knew not that the one you had singled out for such a doom was the son of your king!”

A subdued tumult of sound rose in the hall, that threatening murmur which can grow to terrible proportions when a crowd of people are moved by a common passion of anger. The prior heard it, and flinched. He saw the light in Prince Henry’s eyes, and his knees shook beneath him. He had been caught in an act of lawlessness for which there could be no defence. His only hope lay in abject submission, and for the moment fear conquered even his pride, and he dropped upon his knees before the king’s son.

“Mercy, sweet prince, mercy!” he implored. “I have done amiss; I deny it not; but I was sorely provoked. Have mercy, I pray you, have mercy. As you are strong, be merciful.”

The prince eyed him with a certain scornful contempt, and then he held out his hand towards the town-clerk, who at once put into it a parchment, the ink upon which was only just dry.

“Sign this, my lord prior,” said Prince Henry, “and I will pardon your indiscretion towards me, and the evil intentions you had towards my father’s loyal subjects. Refuse, and the matter will be told in detail in his ears, and I shall not lift a finger to spare you what punishment he may think fit to impose.”

The prior cast his eyes over the paper, which shook in

his hands. It was a clearly-worded deed renouncing, on the part of the prior and all his successors, any rights whatsoever upon the water of the upper streams, and also defining their boundaries in the marsh lands in a strict fashion which left no loophole for future disputes. To sign it would be for ever to abandon the claims so dear to the priors of Gadhelm, yet to refuse might bring upon them the wrath of a king who, if personally merciful to the lives and liberties of his subjects even when they were rebels and offenders, was known to have a rapacious eye for the filling of his coffers, and might well, through his officers, impose fines and conditions which would be far worse than the present concessions. Besides, was it well to anger and thwart the young prince, who might in a few years' time be king himself? The health of the monarch was said to be not of the best. Surely it would be a grievous risk to refuse what Prince Henry asked, and take the consequences of his subsequent anger.

Quickly the prior revolved these contingencies in his mind, and rose slowly to his feet. He held out his hand for the pen, and in presence of the whole breathless company he signed the paper, and was made to seal it with the signet ring of the priory that he wore upon his finger.

Then in bitterness of spirit he turned away, made his obeisance to the prince, and drawing his cowl over his head, walked down the long room with measured tread, feeling almost, with King Agag, as though the bitterness of death was past.

"A good riddance, gentlemen!" cried the prince, when

the great doors had closed behind the retreating form; "and now let us make merry, and drink to the health of loyal little Gadhelm, and confusion to all proud prelates and priors who seek to do her hurt!"

It was a merry banquet in all sooth, and the prince was the life and soul of the party. He made speeches, told stories; his loud laugh made the rafters ring times without number. He paid compliments to the wives and daughters of the burghers; he toasted his comrades of the night; and he set Edmund on one hand and Edgar on the other, when the formal banquet was over, and the guests were shifting to and fro, whispering to them that they were lads after his own heart, and bidding them remember that if ever they wanted a friend they would find one in Henry, Prince of Wales, the king's son.

Suddenly, when the revelry was at its height, the doors of the hall were thrown open, and in marched a number of knights and gentlemen, with Lord Leston at their head. At sight of them the prince burst into a loud laugh, and springing towards them, cried aloud,—

"Did I not wager you, gentlemen, that I would give you the slip yet, and cause you such a hunt as never wild boar did yet? And, by the mass, I have had a right merry time of it, and am richer, by the love of a whole township and by its sumptuous gifts, than I was before. Nay, chide not, my Lord Leston; trust Henry, trust Madcap Hal, for taking care of himself, even though he was threatened by the gallows, and stood a chance of swinging thereon—a sight for angels and men!"

With loud laughter, and many more words that puzzled and confused the gentlemen who had come to seek him, the prince passed up and down the hall, making his farewells, collecting his gifts, and declaring that he had never known a merrier day.

Then he let himself be borne away by the party in search of him, and vaulting into the saddle of his new horse, he waved his hand thrice, took off his cap, and then setting spurs to his steed, galloped off at such a pace that his escort had their work to keep up with him.

CHAPTER XIII.

LORD HASCOMBE.

MARY BEETEL was sitting before her door in the warm evening light, musing of many things.

The visit of Prince Henry to the mill, the liking he had shown for the boys, the stories he had told, the exploit he and they had performed together—all had served to make, as it were, a turning-point in the lives of the pair over whom she watched with such ardent and anxious love.

Edmund and Edgar had spoken of little else during the weeks that had just passed. The incident seemed to have stirred up all the latent unrest in Edmund's soul, and what he wished Edgar wished. But not even Edgar himself could say whether, without Edmund's influence upon him, he would feel the same stirrings of ambition and of eagerness to try conclusions with the world.

Whence came in Edmund those stirrings and promptings which had no place in the hearts of her other children? How was it that Lord James and the young prince had both marked out Edmund as their first object of notice, though ready to give to Edgar his due share of esteem and fellowship? Why was Edmund ever the leader and guide,

so that younger boys would follow and look up to him? For years the doubt which once had troubled her had been laid at rest. Edgar's refinement, book-learning, gentleness, and physical beauty had seemed to mark him out to these simple souls as the son of the gentle and lovely Lady Hascombe, whilst Edmund had seemed to be of the robust burgher type. But was this robustness altogether of that type, or could it be the hot Fitzgerald blood coming out in the youth, as he rose to manhood? Could it be possible that after all they had made a mistake? Oh, how could the cruel doubt ever be laid to rest? Was it wise even to let herself think of it now, when the matter had been settled to all intents and purposes so long ago?

A firm step came ringing down the hard pathway, hard from the summer drought; and Mary looked quickly up, to see a fine-looking man, dressed in the garb of a noble of rank, come towards her with an eager tread. For the first moment she did not know him; but then she started, gave a keen look into the bronzed face, and became white to the lips.

"My Lord Hascombe!" she exclaimed, bending almost to the ground, and trembling all over at the suddenness of the shock; for, much as they had longed for the return of their lord, Mary knew that from the day when he appeared she would lose either one or both of her boys.

"Good Mary, I am come at last," said the earl, putting his hand to his plumed hat, and baring his head for a moment. "I trow well that thou hast had reason to be sore displeased with me; but life is a strange game, and

we are often helpless pawns in the hands of some unseen player. I knew my boy was safe in your hands; I was less sure of his being safe in mine."

"My lord?"

"I have been living in foreign climes, good Mary; and southern suns are not always kindly to young children born in northern latitudes. Also I ever purposed returning home, but from year to year came hindrances; and, as thou knowest, time, that lags so wearily in our eager youth, flies by as we grow older, we scarce know how. Yet when I look round me here, I could think that it had stood still all this while. Even thou thyself dost look more girl than matron."

"I trow not, good my lord," answered Mary, smiling; and indeed there were a few silver threads to be seen in the golden-brown hair smoothly coiled within the covering coif of snowy linen. Yet the face was wonderfully smooth and young-looking still, whilst that of Lord Hascombe was deeply lined, as with cares and troubles and anxieties of many kinds.

"I trust that madam, your lady, is well," said Mary, after a brief pause.

Lord Hascombe gave her a quick look; for a moment his face seemed to darken, but he answered quietly enough,—

"She is well, I thank you, and will take the journey to England more slowly than I have done. I have come hither to prepare for her reception, and to see the boy, and to have him fitly habited and trained for the part he will have to play."

Mary's heart leaped up in her breast. Then the boy was to be acknowledged as his father's heir. There was to be an end to this long masquerade, so unconscious upon Edgar's part. The fears they had sometimes entertained lest the machinations of the stepmother should prevail were groundless. Perhaps there had never been any such stuff in her thoughts. They might have been wronging her by the suspicion. And yet with a pang it came over her that she must give up the boy—give up him who had been from his slight delicacy and softer temperament almost the most dear to her heart. She must give him up; and if he went from her, would she ever keep Edmund? Would the twins, as she must still call them in her heart, ever consent to be separated? Would she lose both of them in a day?

At that moment the sound of boyish voices approaching made the father turn quickly; and as a pair of lads, of almost similar aspect, save a slight difference in height and build, appeared, he said to Mary, in quick, questioning tones,—

“Are these the lads? Do they know aught?”

“They think themselves brothers—and our twin sons,” answered she with a wildly-beating heart; and the next moment Edmund and Edgar stood before them.

“Tell me nothing,” said Lord Hascombe, in a quick, imperious way. “Let me see if I can choose for myself.”

Mary's breath came thick and fast; she leaned against the door-post for support. She longed for her husband's presence, that she might ask him if she should speak of

the doubt that once was, or whether he thought it laid to rest, and her fears idle and needless. John had long been so completely satisfied that the gentler Edgar was the son of the great lady, that he had not thought it worth discussion even when Mary had sometimes expressed a doubt on the point; and would it not be cruel to suggest such a thing as doubt to the father's heart, when there was no way in all the world of laying that doubt to rest?

The boys were silent in astonishment. The white face of their mother, her trembling agitation, the presence of this unknown stranger, and his mysterious words, all impressed them with a conviction that some strange thing was at hand; and they felt as though a half-expected crisis in their lives had come, and gazed at the unfamiliar face of the guest before them with undisguised excitement and curiosity.

He for his part was scanning their faces with an earnestness that would have been disconcerting had they had room for such thoughts. From Edmund to Edgar, and back again to Edmund, his eyes travelled. Edmund bore the look unflinchingly, gazing back with eager, dauntless eyes, whilst Edgar's colour came and went fitfully, and his hands twisted themselves together in a nervous gesture as of repressed emotion.

"By the mass, I cannot tell!" cried Lord Hascombe, striking his hands together. "I would have said that you lad," pointing to Edmund, "had more of my blood in him, and that one," indicating Edgar, "more of his mother—of my wife, the Lady Geraldine. But which is the true

Edgar, and which is Edmund of the mill, I know not. And yet I had thought I must of a certainty know."

"I am Edmund of the mill, sir," spoke the boy, unable longer to hold his peace, "and this is my twin brother Edgar, who is dear to me as mine own soul;" and he took the hand of his comrade in his own as he spoke, and seemed as though he would almost have defied the father to come betwixt them twain.

Lord Hascombe put his hands upon the shoulders of Edgar, and looked deep into his eyes.

"Edgar," he said slowly, "my son Edgar; Edgar Hascombe, the heir to the earldom. Boy, hast thou no welcome for the father thou hast waited for so long?"

Astonishment, dismay, bewilderment were plain to be read in the faces of both the boys.

Edmund, as was his wont, was the first to speak.

"Is that the truth?" he said in a stifled voice. "Is that the key to the mystery? Are you, good lord, our father?"

Despite the words which had just passed between Mary and their guest, it was impossible for Edmund to dissociate himself from the brother, the twin brother of his childhood.

"Edgar's father; not thine, my lad," said Lord Hascombe, his eye still searching Edgar's face with something of hungry yearning. Would there be any love for him, for the father whom the boy had never seen, had never known to be his own? Was it possible that he could love him at sight, that the blood-tie would assert itself in that

mysterious way it sometimes does? Earnestly his eyes dwelt upon the delicate, sensitive features of the boy, in whose lineaments he sought to see something of the mother—the wife of his youth, his first love, his long-dead bride. But he only saw bewilderment, a stress of emotion, tears in the limpid blue eyes, something that felt almost like shrinking in the boy's slight frame as he drew him towards his breast.

Edgar submitted to the embrace, but still spoke no word. It was as though the surprise and bewilderment of it all had struck him dumb. When his father released him he instinctively stepped to Edmund's side, and the taller boy flung his arm across his shoulder in the protecting fashion that had grown habitual with him.

“Edmund is my brother,” said Edgar, breaking the difficult silence with an effort. “Nothing can change that, whoever is my father.”

Lord Hascombe looked at Mary Beutel, who answered at once,—

“It was your wish, good my lord, that the boys should be reared as our twin sons; we have but obeyed your behest in this thing. And the bond is a close one, as you will find. Methinks they could scarce live apart now.”

Lord Hascombe regarded the pair as they stood together, Edmund's face flushed with excitement, Edgar's pale from emotion; and turning to the miller's wife, he said with a short laugh,—

“Since I have spared my son to thee for sixteen years, wilt thou spare thine to me for at least a few short weeks

or months? Shall we not let the lads be together till Edgar has found new companions, new occupations, new interests in life? I shall be alone for a while in the house, save for the presence of the boys. Prithee, good wife, let me take them both. They shall come and see thee daily, so long as we remain at Hascombe Hall."

Mary had long foreseen something of this kind, and her love for the boys hindered any selfish regrets on her part. To separate them would be to cause a heart-breaking sorrow to both. She had doubts whether Edgar would live, uprooted from his home, and taken away from his comrade-brother. The mother's unselfishness prevailed over every other thought, and she answered at once,—

"Good my lord, let it be so. The boys will thrive best together, and the time has come when they should live a different life. Let it be as you will."

"Then I would take them back with me forthwith, and tell them the whole story that you have kept so faithfully, my good friends. I will see thee and thy husband tomorrow, when he is home again. But let me take the lads for the nonce. My heart is hungry for my boy—my lost Geraldine's son. You will not grudge the pair to me, you and John? I have waited sixteen long years for this hour."

Mary had not a word to say. Indeed, she was almost glad that Lord Hascombe should take upon himself the task of telling all the story to the boys. To her they were so like her own sons, that it was bewildering to regard them in any other light. The wistful light in

Edgar's eyes went to her heart, and she longed to press him to her bosom, and tell him that he would always have a mother in her, let him be ever so much Lord Hascombe's son. But, with the father standing by, she feared to do so. The boy who had been all hers heretofore was passing into a new life and new surroundings.

Lord Hascombe cut short the interview by saying a kindly farewell to Mary, and bidding the lads follow him up to the house. This they did—Edmund eagerly and willingly, so full was he of excitement and curiosity to hear what this strange thing was which had befallen his brother. To call or to think of Edgar by any other name was impossible to him. It was a lesson he did not even seek to teach himself. The pair walked with arms linked, and when the path grew wide enough they quickened their paces till they reached Lord Hascombe's side. Something in his aspect touched Edmund's heart, and seemed to draw him towards him. There was a look of sadness in his eyes, the boy thought, and an air of loneliness in his aspect.

Lord Hascombe turned his head and looked with a smile at the pair. They were in the great beech glade where once they had found Lord James Fitzgerald; and at some remark or question from the father out came the whole story, Edmund being the chief speaker, but Edgar gradually throwing off his reserve and joining in, till by the time they had reached the Hall itself a sort of friendliness and familiarity had been established between them, and the first strangeness and constraint had passed away.

Martin was on the lookout for his master, and when he saw by whom he was accompanied his face brightened and beamed. He came hastening forth to meet them, and taking Edgar by the hand, he, as it were, led him into the familiar hall, and said in a low whisper of emotion,—

“Dear lad, dost know that all will be thine one day?”

He had always been fond of the boys, this faithful old servant, and it was the keenest joy to him to have his lord back, and see him recognize the young heir. Edgar shrank a little at the words, and said in a half whisper,—

“Would it had been Edmund! He is more fit than I.”

But he spoke low, so that only faithful Martin heard; and he made answer, with encouraging gesture,—

“Nay, but thou wilt feel differently when the strangeness has passed away. Thou hast long learned to love the old house; soon thou wilt feel it as thy home.”

Edgar was looking at the old servant, who had so encouraged them about the place, and had taught them the family lore and the traditions of the house, and kept them practised in martial exercises. A light came into his mind.

“Then thou hast always known, good Martin?”

He made a slight sign of assent.

“Ay, boy—my lord, I should say; I pray you pardon. I and a few have known, but it was your father’s wish that the matter should be kept secret. He will doubtless tell you wherefore, when you have known him something longer.”

There were about a score of servants in the Hall now, Lord Hascombe having travelled with a small retinue from

the Continent, and engaged a few more in London as he passed through. There was no great state observed at present in the matter of service and so forth, but it seemed stately enough to the two boys to sit down at the high table with Lord Hascombe, whilst the servants waited on them, and the esquires occupied a lower table, and carried on their own conversation and jests at the other end of the hall.

Lord Hascombe was rather silent at the supper, though he drew Edmund on to speak of many things, and his eyes rested long and lingeringly on Edgar's face. But when they rose from table he took them aside with him into a little room still bright with the westering sunlight, and they both knew that this was the room which Lady Geraldine—the first Lady Hascombe—had used for her own, and that the needlework, faded now with time, was the product of her own industry, and that the choice and beautiful objects lying here and there had all been gifts to her from her husband or her brothers. Nothing had ever been changed in that little room, and old Dorcas had made it her care to keep it ever fresh and spotless.

Edmund looked about him with eyes full of a new interest. It was no longer of Lady Hascombe that he thought; it was of Edgar's mother. It was so hard to believe, to understand. Edgar's mother! And Lord Hascombe was his father! Would he ever get reconciled to the thought of his new position? Edmund's heart swelled with a certain pride in the knowledge of what his brother was—the heir of Hascombe Hall. But how would Edgar

regard it himself? Even his twin comrade could not tell that, nor read the expression of those down-bent eyes.

"My boy," said Lord Hascombe, seating himself and looking full at Edgar, then letting his glance travel to the more open and responsive face of Edmund, "I have a story to tell you, and I think I will tell it you forthwith, that we may after to-night start fair, without mystery between us as father and son."

He then proceeded to tell the boys of his own rashness in embroiling himself in the Lambert Simnel rebellion, and of his hasty flight with his young wife, and the decision respecting the boy to be left behind.

"It seemed safest for the child to pass as the miller's son. The priors of Gadhelm have ever had their suspicions. I have had messages and letters from them ere this. But they could prove naught, and the secret was kept. Had it been otherwise, they would have known no rest till they had gained possession of the boy, for their own purposes."

Edmund and Edgar exchanged glances. They knew something of the craft and guile of the priors of Gadhelm.

"But the question you will be asking one of another is, Why was the secret kept so long? And that I will now explain. Perhaps you know that when you were infants Mary Beetel fell ill of the sickness that prevailed about that time in many places in the kingdom, and that you twain also had the same complaint. The news reached me in Ireland that she and the boys had both died of the sickness; but I was afraid to tell my wife that news, as she was in very frail health, and I was about to start with

her for the distant shores of Italy. When we reached that land, I knew that I must lose her ; but since her great joy was to talk of her little son in England, I had not the heart to speak of our loss—as I believed it—though I told it to our friend the Italian princess who befriended us, and in whose house thy mother, my boy, at last died, surrounded by her tender and loving care.”

Lord Hascombe paused, and a cloud seemed to come over his face. Memories were stirring within him that were of mingled pain and pleasure. There was a slight struggle visible before he spoke again, and then he looked no longer into the faces of the two boys, but out into the sunset of the sky.

“I was very lonely, and the princess was my best friend. She did all that woman could to comfort me. I came to depend on her. My wife had loved her ; I loved her too, though not as I had loved my Geraldine. I married her ; and six months later I heard that the rumour of the death of Mary Beutel and the twin sons, as they were called, was false. My son Edgar still lived, and he was the heir to my title and estates.

“My duty was to tell my wife, but I shirked that duty. I was well aware that she would resent the thought that I had a son. I had told her plainly that Geraldine’s boy had died, and she had kept the secret from the mother, who would talk by the hour of her little son in England, whom to the last she always looked to go and see when the summer came. I had learned by this time that there is an element of jealousy in some women’s love, and that the

southern wife whom I had married, and whom I truly loved, was full of this fire of mingled love and jealousy. I dared not tell her. I thought that something might perhaps happen to save me from the need of doing so. I might die ; the child might sicken once again and die. Even my wife might not live ; some turn in our affairs might come to relieve me of the burden of the secret. And gradually as years passed by I almost came to forget it, save at moments when messages or letters might bring the thing to my remembrance. Then I began to know that sooner or later something must be done, and that I must at least visit England and judge for myself what steps to take."

He paused and looked at the boys, and Edgar suddenly stepped forward and dropped upon one knee before his father.

"Good my lord, and let me speak this once. Why take me from the happy life of obscurity that I have led ? I crave not rank or wealth ; I crave not any high position. My love is for a quiet life, for study, for meditation. Let me but have a few pounds yearly for myself and Edmund, that we may go to Oxford and study there, and gain learning and renown ; and let your princess wife's children reign here after you. Stir not up strife in your own household. I have never been Edgar Hascombe ; let me remain Edgar Beetel to the last. I speak not from lack of duty to you, my father, but because it seems the best and simplest way. I cannot live without Edmund for my brother. Let us, then, be as if this thing were not ; and let your other children come after you, whilst Edmund and I remain brothers and comrades ever."

Lord Hascombe looked steadfastly into the earnest face of the boy, and his answer was spoken in a rather sorrowful voice.

"My boy," he said, "I speak it to my shame, but there have been times when I myself have asked whether such a thing as this might not be done—whether by some arrangement I could pass over the rights of my firstborn son, and let the son of my second marriage take his place. But the time for such thoughts has gone by. I have seen and known too much. I am thankful—more thankful than I can say—that I have a son with only British blood in his veins to be lord of Hascombe after me."

He spoke with some repressed bitterness, and with such a look of pain upon his face that Edgar's soul was stirred, and for the first time he felt a drawing towards this new father; and taking one of his hands, he asked gently,—

"And how is that, good my lord father?"

Edmund drew a pace nearer, his eyes bright and full of interest. Something in the faces and expressions of the two lads seemed to touch Lord Hascombe, and he put out his hand and drew Edmund up to him, so that he had now one on either side hanging upon his words, intently listening for what was to come.

"My next boy, Hugo," he said slowly, "is now twelve years old; and for that he has dwelt always in foreign climes, and comes of a southern race on his mother's side, he seems older than he is. He is the apple of his mother's eye. She gives him a power that would not be granted to so young a lad here, and of late he has begun to use it.

I have watched him, Edgar ; I have watched your brother. With what he does I do not interfere, for it is by his mother's right that he rules upon her estate, and she is able to bid him stay and restrain his hand if she desires it. I have only stood by and watched, and I have seen enough. Hugo is cruel, merciless, tyrannical. He cares for nothing but his own pleasure, his own will ; none may interfere with that. He treats his servants like dogs ; he will ride down a peasant as he would trample a snake underfoot. If a man, or even a boy, offends him, he punishes him with a savage ferocity which has oftentimes made my flesh creep. He seems to delight in inflicting pain ; and when I speak to his mother, she does but laugh, and tell me that I must not look for her son to grow up like a white-livered English boy. Words like these oft repeated, sights such as I have seen times without number, have set me thinking—have changed many things in the world for me. I have lands and estates in England. My wife has larger castles and broader lands and titles and to spare for her boys in Italy. I have said in my heart, Edgar, 'Let the English-speaking, English-reared lad be the son to rule in England, and let the lands in Italy be divided between the two boys who have southern blood in their veins. They will have enough and to spare. Why should a master who would be as an alien to them ever rule over the tenants of Hascombe ?' Not a word have I dared to speak of all this to my wife. I said in my heart, 'I will come first and see the boy ; I will find out whether he is fit in very truth for the place which is his by right. I will take him from

the mill ; I will win his heart, that he may love me as his father. Then will I present him to my wife, and tell her that the son reported to be dead is alive and well, and that he, and not Hugo, will be the earl after me—will be the heir of Hascombe Hall.’”

Edmund’s eyes kindled ; his breath came thick and fast. It seemed to him that he understood more of Lord Hascombe’s heart than he had ever thought to do. He understood his former doubts ; he entered into his present feelings. He marvelled what sort of a woman this southern lady might be, who seemed at once so full of love and of cruelty, of devotion and of jealousy.

“ My lord,” he cried eagerly—his first thought, as ever, for Edgar—“ if these things be so, and my lady comes to find a son not her child established here as heir of all, then I beseech you let me be ever with my brother to help and shield him, for methinks there may e’en be peril for him from the hot-headed boy whom he has supplanted, if not from—”

He paused. He remembered that Lady Hascombe was still the wife, and that she had been well beloved once, and might still hold sway in her husband’s heart, albeit it was plain that Lord Hascombe was not blind to her defects in the training of her children.

Edgar edged nearer to the speaker, and there was an appealing look in his eyes as he cried,—

“ Good my lord father, let but Edmund remain with me as friend and comrade and brother, and I will seek in all things to be a son to you, and to take the place that is

mine, and that you desire of me to fill. But, pray you, send him not away. Alone I should be sore afraid. Edmund knows not the meaning of the word fear. Would that he, and not I, were in truth your son!"

"Nay, my lord; let me be your servant and comrade and esquire!" cried Edmund. "Let me fight your battles, and I ask no more. I am glad—right glad—that no son of the south, cruel and remorseless, will ever rule here; but let Edgar take his place, and let me remain at his side, and the heir of Hascombe Hall shall never lack a comrade and a defender."

Lord Hascombe glanced from face to face, and stifled his wish to echo Edgar's aspiration. He felt that Edmund would be the one to grapple with the difficulties of the situation which he clearly foresaw, but perhaps the point would be gained if he kept the stronger lad ever by his son's side, as his faithful comrade and friend.

He took the hands of both boys and held them in his own.

"So be it," he said—"one as son, the other as friend and comrade; and we will trust and hope and believe that all will be well. I will do what father can to keep his firstborn son in the place to which he has the right."

CHAPTER XIV.

FATHER AND SON.

IT is wonderful how quickly youth adapts itself to new ideas and new conditions. Within three days from the time when the astonishing news had been sprung upon "the twins" that Edgar was the son of Lord Hascombe, and he had taken the boys to the Hall with him, both had grown so far used to the idea and to the new life unfolding before them that they could enter with zest into the plans for the future which were from time to time unfolded before them, and look back upon the old peaceful life at the mill with a sort of wonder, feeling that it belonged to a page of existence which was now closed for ever.

There was great wonder and excitement in Gadhelm when the foster-brothers appeared there, riding one on each side of Lord Hascombe. The news of his return, and of the fact, known to so few, that Edgar was his son, had spread like wildfire through the place, and he was welcomed back with a loving loyalty and warmth that touched his heart not a little. Removed from the immediate personal influence of his wife, surrounded by familiar sights and faces, old associations came crowding back upon him, and

he marvelled in his heart that he had ever left England and home for so long a space, and resolved that this should be no hasty visit, but that he would live for many years amongst his own people, and give himself up to the training and education of his handsome young son.

Edgar, now equipped in accordance with his rank, was a son of whom any father might be proud. His golden locks, his dreamy blue eyes, and the delicacy of his features and colouring, all combined to give to his aspect something striking and picturesque. Lord Hascombe was also well pleased to find that his mind had been stored with more learning than he had hoped to find in one reared as a miller's son; whilst in knightly and martial sports and exercises he showed a skill which only wanted a little practice to enable him to hold his own amongst his compeers.

Edmund, attired in all the bravery of a young knight's favoured esquire, received almost the same notice from Lord Hascombe as his own son. The attachment between the foster-brothers was such that it was almost impossible to dissociate the one from the other; and Edgar's unconscious dependence upon Edmund convinced the father more and more that it would be impossible for the present to separate the pair.

He had already obtained the free consent of John and Mary Beetel to keep Edmund, to be trained with Edgar, and to serve him in the capacity of esquire. The miller and his wife, loving both boys almost equally—indeed, Mary's heart always yearned somewhat more over Edgar

than Edmund—would never have raised a finger to interfere in an arrangement which was so essential for the happiness and welfare of both. Besides, they were well aware by this time that Edmund had been somewhat unfitted for the life of a city craftsman by the lack of any special training; and as this had been for Edgar's sake—since Lord Hascombe's son could not be bound apprentice to a trade—it seemed only right and just that he should now share those advantages which his close connection with the heir of Hascombe Hall gave to him.

And besides this, as Mary sometimes said in her heart, if by any remote possibility they had decided erroneously as to the identity of the boys, it was well that both should be trained in like fashion; and well she knew that whatever was Edgar's would in a sense be Edmund's, and that he would lead as happy a life by his brother's side as though he were lord of all.

By her husband's wish she said not a word to Lord Hascombe as to any possible doubt between the lads. John had none; he did not share Mary's occasional lapse into uncertainty. His observation was less keen and alert, his mind more easily balanced, more swayed by matter-of-fact common-sense. He argued that since there was now no possible way of discovering the truth, it was only inflicting needless pain to raise the doubt. Here again the teaching of the church, which had become imbued with some of the corruptions of those errors that emanated from the pontifical centre at Rome, prevailed to stifle the natural candour and straightforwardness of an honest mind. The

end was to justify the means. Such was the teaching of the priests, and the poison had slowly spread, so that simple folks, without much power of reasoning, and without the light of the Scriptures for their individual guidance, easily fell into the error of believing themselves justified in some small deceit, positive or negative, if it were in a good cause, and not committed for selfishness or malice. It seemed more truly kind to both father and son that no sense of uncertainty should raise a shadow between them; and Mary was easily persuaded to hold her peace when she felt that perhaps to speak would be to bring a shadow over the lives of those she most wished to see happy.

Gadhelm was greatly astonished and then greatly elated at the news. It explained many things with regard to these boys which had perplexed the citizens before. The few who had known the truth all along were besieged with questions and comments; and whenever Lord Hascombe appeared in the town with Edmund and Edgar beside him, his presence was the signal for rejoicings and congratulations. He was quickly invited to a banquet given by the mayor in honour of his return, in which Edgar was formally presented to the townsmen as his son and heir.

Right glad were the burgesses of Gadhelm to welcome him as such. Rumours concerning the foreign wife and foreign born and reared children had sometimes given them a sense of slight uneasiness. True, Gadhelm was a town on the royal demesne, and was not in any sense a feudal dependence of any nobleman; but, for all that, a tyran-

nous Lord of Hascombe, without sympathy for the burghers, a man disposed to push his prerogative and strain his authority, could be a source both of annoyance and danger to the town. And if he should join forces with the prior, and get them, as it were, between two fires, then there was a good chance that some of their most precious liberties might be threatened; and, as was natural, the citizens were disposed to look rather askance at any successor to Lord Hascombe who had been born and reared abroad, and whose mother was a foreigner.

Gladly therefore was Edgar's health pledged in full bumpers, and there was great applause to the short speech in which the boy acknowledged the toast, and assured his good friends, as he called them, of his unalterable affection and goodwill.

"I shall always remember with pride," concluded Edgar, "that I have been reared as a citizen of Gadhelm; and whatever in the future may be my power to help the burghers and citizens, they may rest assured that it shall never be lacking to them."

Lord Hascombe listened well pleased, if a little surprised, at the cordiality betwixt burgher and noble. He had been resident in a land where the differences betwixt class and class were more sharply defined than at that time in England, when the crafts were rising in importance, and the fall of so many great houses during the recent wars had made room, as it were, for the growth of the middle class. Lord Hascombe was a man very susceptible to present impression, as may perhaps have already been

gathered, and he was touched by the genuine cordiality and goodwill shown to him and his by the burgesses of the city. He felt that it might be a matter of advantage to him to keep that love and goodwill. He was glad to see how warmly Edgar's words were received, how well the citizens seemed to love him, and how greatly they rejoiced to hear him spoken of as the heir of Hascombe Hall.

There had been moments when the earl had had doubts and qualms upon this very point. He was still in a tremor when he thought of the meeting with his wife that lay before him. He knew the power she possessed over him when they were together, and it was partly this that had urged upon him at last to take this great step alone, freed from her influence, untrammelled by the fear of what she would say or do. Now that it was taken there could be no drawing back. Edgar was his acknowledged son, and there were witnesses enough to establish his identity, and to prove that his infant son had been left with Mary of the mill. The boy was well fitted for the position he was to fill; and Lord Hascombe was conscious of a rising tide of parental love in his heart which the children of his second marriage had not called up. Indeed, there had been something in the peculiarly jealous temperament of the mother which had hindered this kind of love. She seemed to resent any display of affection that was not lavished upon herself, whether it was that of father to children, or children to father. She must be the first, the object of the love of all. She gave a fierce, passionate love herself, and expected the same in return. She

had in this way been a strangely dominating influence in the life of her husband ; but he had been conscious of a certain oppression and sense of imprisonment of his faculties. Since he had left her, and found himself in the old, free country, with his own retainers about him, and a fair young son of an age to be a confidant and companion, he felt a wonderful sense of exhilaration and freedom. And now when he found that these honest burghers were ready and willing to show such warm support and friendship for himself and his son, he felt an access of pleasure and strength. It was as if, in a time of threatened warfare, an unexpected ally had risen at his own gates for his support and assistance.

Not even to his son did Lord Hascombe ever hint that he looked for a period of strife and warfare at home, when his wife learned that her own son was not the heir to those English titles and estates of which he had spoken to her so much. But he himself knew well how it would be.

It would not matter to her that her own children would be amply dowered from her own great wealth. She would ever regard Edgar as an interloper, if not an impostor ; would think herself grossly deceived and cozened—perhaps not without cause ; and would show her displeasure and vent her enmity in a hundred nameless ways so familiar to a proud and jealous woman.

The prospect was not a pleasant one, yet Lord Hascombe was just enough to recognize that the fault was in part his own. He had lacked courage to tell his wife when he had heard that Geraldine's boy was yet alive ; he had let many years go by, and had still let her believe that Hugo

was his heir. He had talked of his lands in fair England, till she had come to have a desire to see them for herself, and show his inheritance to her boy; and now, when she brought him hither, it would be to find that another boy stood in the place of her son, that there was an elder son to succeed to title and estate, and that Hugo must be content with the second place—her heir, but not his father's.

But the evil day might not be just yet. The princess was never one to hurry herself. Her journey would be taken in leisurely fashion, with a large retinue that would in itself delay her coming. He would need time to prepare Hascombe Hall for her reception, and that house in London which had been shut up so long, but which he would open now, and keep open, ready to make a second home for some of them, if they should find the walls of one house too narrow to hold them.

It was with a thrill of genuine excitement and delight that Edmund heard one day in the courtyard from the men-at-arms that the master purposed to ride to London in two days' time, and eagerly he rushed indoors to seek Edgar and find if the thing were true.

Edgar was often to be found revelling in the books and parchments of the library, and in the musical instruments of the minstrels' gallery, as Edmund was in the armoury and tilt-yard and stables. When not together the lads were each to be found at their respective favourite pastimes—Edmund out of doors with horse, or lance, or sword, in exercise; Edgar discoursing sweet music, or

poring over some ponderous tome or illuminated scroll. It was in the library that Edmund found him when he came rushing in filled with excitement.

"Hast thou heard the news, Eddie? Are we, in sooth, to go to London?"

"I had not heard it, else wouldst thou have done the same," answered Edgar; but it was an exciting item of news, for both the lads had dreamed many a time of their entry into the great city of which Prince Henry had spoken to them in glowing words. They longed to see the wonderful buildings and churches, the miles of streets, the shops with their swinging signs and their crowd of noisy 'prentice boys. In London town, if men spoke sooth, there was always much to see and much to do, always stirrings of strife and hurrying to and fro. Town life had its romance for boys bred in the traditions of a town, and they longed to see a city so far, far larger and greater than any they had hitherto dreamed of.

But ere they could make their way to Lord Hascombe's presence to ask the truth from him, they were aware of approaching steps and voices; the door of the library was thrown open, and the earl appeared with the black-browed prior of Gadhelm in his wake.

When last they had seen that face it had been distorted with rage and fury, but now it was smiling and serene, and the look bent upon the two lads was one of suave amiability, as though he were being shown for the first time the newly-found son of Lord Hascombe.

"Doubtless, my lord prior, you have seen these lads

before," said Lord Hascombe; "but let me present them to your reverence anew as my son and heir and his foster-brother, who is to remain his comrade and friend in the capacity of esquire."

Edmund held himself very proudly, and only bent his head as slightly as possible to the prelate. Edgar, seeing that his father expected it of him, bent the knee, though somewhat unwillingly, and received a benediction.

"A scholar, I see," remarked the prior; "truly it is well to see a love for letters in a youth of goodly parts. Thou must come some day to the priory, young sir, and we will show thee what treasures we have there. A love of learning is no unknighly possession in these more peaceful days, and the love is like to spread. Canst read Latin? Good, very good. We will make a pretty scholar of thee yet. Thy father will perchance spare thee to us one of these days, and we will show thee and teach thee many things of which thou hast no knowledge yet."

Edmund's eyes darkened, and it was with some difficulty that he restrained himself from making a retort which would have been unseemly under the present circumstances. It was difficult for him to remember always that he was no longer Edgar's twin and champion, but the esquire of a young noble who held a rank altogether higher than his own, and had a father to order his life for him. Not one whit of envy or jealousy entered into Edmund's heart in respect to this; only from time to time he felt a species of revolt, because it seemed almost as though Edgar's life were passing into other keeping.

As the prior walked away, with Lord Hascombe attending him to the door, he said in a slightly significant tone,—

“Methinks, my lord, that if thou dost desire to hold the first place in thy son’s heart, and gain influence over him thyself, thou must needs rid him for a while of the attendance and companionship of the lad Edmund Beetel. Foster-brothers they may be, but it is not always wise for such to grow up as brothers through life. Thou wilt find Edgar placable and teachable alone, but Edmund is of different stuff. He will likely prove a sore thorn in thy side. However, thy lady when she comes will take his measure. I trow she will advise thee for the best.”

The prior went, having done his best to produce a favourable impression upon a man known to hold Holy Church in deep reverence; and Lord Hascombe stood for a moment lost in somewhat uneasy thought, feeling as though some unwelcome idea had just been intruded upon him.

As he re-entered the library he heard Edmund say,—

“He is an evil man, and is here for no good purpose—”

The lad stopped short upon seeing Lord Hascombe, and for once the earl turned upon him with a sharp reproof.

“Have a care, sirrah, how thou dost speak evil of dignitaries and holy men. I have heard something too much of brawlings against Holy Church by upstart citizens. Have a care, for I will not have the church and its dignitaries lightly scoffed at in my house, or treated with the ill-bred insolence that comes somewhat too easily to proud-

spirited youth. Remember that, Edmund Beetel, and have a care for thy manners henceforward. Thou hast learned something too much of freedom in the past. In the future thou must learn to curb thy tongue and to curb thy haughty spirit."

Lord Hascombe turned his back upon him rather pointedly, and addressed himself to Edgar, speaking of the proposed journey to London, and how they were to travel.

It was Edmund's first lesson in humiliation, and for a moment his pride rebelled, and he was half disposed to stride from the room and betake himself to the mill till he was recalled by the request of the earl. But a few appealing looks from Edgar, combined with his own sound sense and growing affection for Lord Hascombe, turned the scale, and he recognized that in this house at least he must learn self-control, and seek to act as was becoming to one in his situation. He could resign his attendance upon Edgar, and rank as an independent burgher citizen if he chose; but if he elected the place offered him here, he must abide by the restraints of such an office, as any other servant was forced to do.

When Lord Hascombe next spoke to him it was in quite a different voice and manner. Truth to tell, the earl was much drawn to Edmund, and sometimes wished that his own boy had the same bold spirit and ready tongue. He found some difficulty in dissociating the pair in his thoughts, and gave to both an almost equal meed of affection. He had heard their stories of town life, and even of their strife with the prior, not without

interest and sympathy; and he had been vexed that the water question should have become such a source of trouble, when he had definitely spoken of looking into the matter himself on his return. He was not at all disposed to reopen a question which Prince Henry had so definitely decided, and had told the prior that he had only his own impatience to thank for the summary way in which things had been done. But at the same time he had no wish at all to be on bad terms with the monks and the monastery. His wife was an ardent devotee of Holy Church, and filled to the brim with the superstitions of the land of her birth. She was Romanist rather than English Catholic, and would be a firm and stanch ally of the prior through thick and thin, as her husband well knew, and it was far from his wish to be otherwise than on good terms with that dignitary himself. He was vexed to find how little reverence these boys had for the inmates of the priory, although in other respects he did not find them lacking in their duties towards religion, and they were as well instructed in their faith as he could have expected them to be.

The journey to London was now all the talk. As the days were still long, and the boys strong and used to the saddle, the ride was to be accomplished in one day.

It meant only an early start in the fresh coolness of the August morning, and a ride of between thirty and forty miles to be accomplished before sunset. The boys were up with the lark, seeing to their arms and accoutre-

ments, too excited for sleep so soon as their eyes were fairly open. When once on the road, they rode one on either side of Lord Hascombe, asking eagerly of all the things they were to see and hear—whether the king and the prince would be there, whether the king kept his court in the Tower, and what that great fortress was like, and a thousand questions of like nature, till Lord Hascombe found himself so well entertained in talking and answering that he had never found a day's riding pass so pleasantly before.

It was towards evening when they saw before them that cloud of vapour hanging over the horizon, which Lord Hascombe pointed to, telling them that it rose from the smoke of the fires of the great town; and the boys gazed breathlessly before them, watching whilst the spires and towers seemed to spring up one by one before them, and here and there the sunlight caught some white stone pinnacle or some lofty window, and they saw the glitter from a great way off.

“Would you cross the river by the ferry or by the bridge?” asked Lord Hascombe, halting at a place where the road forked, and looking at Edgar, who in his turn looked at Edmund, uncertain how to answer.

“If we go by the bridge we shall pass through sundry streets,” said Lord Hascombe, “though ye must needs leave the seeing of the city for the morrow; if we take the ferry, we shall land at Temple Stairs, and hard by mine own house that looks upon the river; but the passage with horses is somewhat slow and troublesome—

hence I shall send them and the servants round by the bridge. But we will go which way ye will."

"Oh, let us go by the bridge then also!" cried Edmund. "I would fain see the streets, and the crowds, and the houses on the bridge, of which I have heard."

Edmund's wish was always Edgar's, and the party therefore took the right fork of the road, and presently found themselves in the narrow streets of Southwark, where, to the delight of the boys, some great tumult was apparently going on, for they found themselves almost at once hemmed in, in the midst of a shouting, yelling crowd, who seemed stirred up by feelings of intense passion and wrath, and were clamouring so lustily that none could well hear what any man said.

Lord Hascombe in vain asked the cause of the tumult, and the boys gazed about them at the crowded streets, and the wide river, which they dimly discerned through the blocks of buildings, and felt as though they dreamed it all. They were being pressed by the crowd all this while in the direction of a church, and suddenly a great yell arose, followed by a dead silence. The bell above their heads began to boom forth a note like a knell, and a whisper ran through the crowd,—

"He comes! he comes! A plague upon Holy Church, which takes part with such wretches as he!"

Then the boys saw a strange sight. Forth from the doors of the church there came, attended by some vested priests, a man, an evil-looking fellow, who seemed to shrink in terror from the sight of the crowd gathered

about the gates. He had no shoes on his feet, no cap on his head, and was clad in one long, straight garment, something like a monk's gown, but shorter, and without girdle, and in his hand he bore a white cross. His face was white with fear and hatred, and there was a villanous scowl upon his brow.

The crowd opened right and left as he appeared, and though a curse deep and full of wrath ran through it, none of the angry men laid hands upon him as he went, though by their faces one would have thought that he would never pass them alive.

"Who is he? who is he?" asked Edmund, touching a bystander on the shoulder, and leaning from the saddle to catch the reply.

"What but a vile miscreant of a Jew, or Frenchman, or some outlandish man!" he answered back. "A curse upon all such devil's spawn! He was pursued for his life for some crime, and a good old woman living hard by, who pitied him for his wounds and bruises and for his fears, gave him shelter and cared for him for a week or more, when one night he rises at midnight and kills her in her bed and rifles her house. He would have escaped unknown but for the howling of her little dog, who got beneath the bed, whence he could not dislodge him, and made such a clamour that the neighbours were aroused. Then the wretch escaped by a window with his ill-gotten gains, and took sanctuary in yon church. The mayor and citizens came to demand him, that they might hang him, but the priests refused to give him up. They punish

in their own way, but methinks hanging is the better plan. He will walk forth barefoot, marked of all men, to the nearest port, and then quit these shores for ever. But we would have torn him in pieces or hanged him by the neck. A pest upon these rascally priests who stand betwixt the murderer and the gallows!"

"I marvel ye do not fall upon him and tear him limb from limb," cried Edmund between his shut teeth. "Sanctuary was never meant for such as he."

"They would excommunicate the whole parish if we did," grumbled the man, "and we do not care to risk our own souls for the carcass of such as he."

Yet it seemed as though there were some in Southwark who did not share this fear. Suddenly a new sort of sound arose—a screeching, quite unlike that of a short time before, the voices being more shrill, the cries more frenzied.

"By the mass, the women have set upon him!" cried a voice from somewhere overhead, as though the sight had been seen from some upper window.

The priests returning to the church heard it, and strove to get through the crowd, which hemmed them in on every side, and seemed of set purpose deaf to their protests and entreaties; and from the street beyond the wild, shrill sounds proceeded.

It was true enough, as they heard upon the morrow. The fear of Holy Church and her ban had kept the men under restraint, but it had not been enough to withhold the women, when they saw the murderer of their good

old neighbour appear. They must have been prepared beforehand, it would seem, for from the windows above there rained down not only shrill cries and curses, but a hail of stones and pitchers of boiling water; and ere the miserable wretch had run the length of the street, he had fallen stunned and maimed, and was promptly stoned to death as he lay by the viragoes of Southwark, outraged past bearing by the brutality of the criminal.

"In truth this is a great city," cried Edmund, to whose quick ears the rumour, afterwards verified, had already penetrated. "We of Gadhelm are not alone in withstanding Holy Church when she seeks to protect evil-doers. I will tell this story at home anon. Our burgher folk will be right glad to hear it."

But Edgar and his father were glad to get out of the crowd, and the boy was instantly engrossed in the wonderful sight of the great flowing river, and the stately bridge, with its double row of houses upon it.

"Can the sea itself be grander?" asked the boy, as he looked down into the great flowing mass of water, the like of which he had never dreamed of before.

Lord Hascombe laughed, and pointed out the spire of St. Paul's and various other stately buildings; but the boys were all eyes, and could scarcely attend to his words, so wonderful to them was the sight of the everlasting flow of life in this great city, the innumerable streets and buildings, the cries of the shopmen, the crowds of foot passengers and horsemen jostling one another in the busy streets, the constables and watchmen in their strange

dress, and the gay trappings of the town dandies, who even at this hour were to be seen in great numbers in the streets.

And so, in a maze of wonder, delight, and curiosity, they reached Lord Hascombe's house hard by the Temple Stairs.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PRINCESS.

FOR the first few days the boys had perfect liberty to go to and fro as they would in this wonderful city, and get their fill of its many wonders, of which they thought they would never be weary, so strange and marvellous was the sight of the vast concourse of people in the streets, the length and number of these, and the many and sumptuous buildings and churches, the like of which they had never seen or imagined before.

They visited the Tower, St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, and wandered to and fro in the streets. They strolled through Temple Gardens, thinking of the stories they had heard of kings and nobles now dead and gone. They visited the various inns in Fleet Street, Hole Bourne (as it was then called), and the Temple, also those buildings and streets fast growing up without the liberties and city walls; and it seemed to them as though such a wondrous city had surely never been before. Edgar openly marvelled whether ancient Rome could have beheld more wondrous sights.

The shops and workshops were a source of endless

interest to the boys, who had been brought up in close touch with the craftsmen in their own town. They wandered through the Cheap, through Ironmongers' Lane, Cooks' Lane, Smithfield, and all other places where men of different crafts congregated together, formed into guilds, doing the same work, and rigidly jealous of any encroachment upon their privileges.

These bright-faced, eager boys from the country made friends quickly with the craftsmen, told them their history frankly enough, and were rewarded by being shown many clever trade tricks unknown in Gadhelm, which Edmund practised with a skill that astonished his instructors, promising himself the pleasure of passing on his new learning to the craftsmen of Gadhelm.

It was a disappointment to both boys, but particularly to Edmund, that the king and Prince Henry were both at Windsor, and not likely to be in London at the present season. His story, however, of Prince Hal and the prior was repeated to the craftsmen of London town again and yet again, and was always received with loud laughter and applause. It was plain that young Henry's strong personality had already made its mark upon the citizens. They had stories to tell of his pranks, and of his sayings and doings. He was far better liked than the king his father, although of him no man spoke ill, since the city was thriving wondrously during this time of peace, and the respite from the fierce civil wars of the past century was hailed as the greatest blessing and boon.

One of the chief amusements of the boys when they

got home towards evening, tired with their long day of sight-seeing, yet always eager for more, was to watch from the windows of their own house the river sports and pastimes of the young citizens, who, when their day's work was over, would sally forth, some to the open spaces within and without the city, others in boats and wherries, and there indulge in mock battles and feats of strength and skill, which were watched with more or less attention by the citizens, and even the gentry of the town.

There was a species of water quintain that afforded endless amusement to the spectators, and at which Edmund longed to try his skill. If the lad who struck at the mark were not skilful, he was certain to fall headlong into the water, to the great merriment of the spectators. If, on the other hand, he came off victor in these contests, he was rewarded with some sort of prize.

Other lads in boats would meet in mimic warfare, and often the boats would capsize, or the combatants fall overboard; but as there were always wherries in attendance, these casualties were lightly regarded, and a ducking came all in the day's work to the hardy young craftsmen and 'prentice boys of London.

One pleasant excitement was afforded to the lads by the great horse fair held in the fields without the walls. In days when coaches were few and cumbersome, and when almost all men travelled on horseback, and gentlemen and nobles had great followings of servants—although the king was doing something to check the extravagance of some of his nobles in this respect—there was a great demand for

good horses, and the breeding of them or the importing from Ireland and Flanders was a considerable industry.

Lord Hascombe wanted horses for his household, and took the boys with him to see the fair ; and a strange and wonderful sight it was for them, since the concourse was greater than anything they could have imagined without seeing for themselves. The shouts and chaffering of the men, the trampling and neighing of the horses, and the reckless fashion in which some of the riders dashed to and fro through the crowded meadows to show the skill and address of the animal they desired to sell, made an ineffaceable impression upon the boys, and they were quite lost in admiration of some of the beautiful barbs and palfreys that foreign-looking venders were eagerly displaying.

Lord Hascombe was able to converse with these men in their own tongue ; and, greatly to the delight and gratification of the boys, he made them each a present of a beautiful young horse, to be their absolute property. Edgar's animal was the more finely bred—a dark bay, almost black, with a skin that shone like satin. Edmund's chestnut was a beautiful creature, full of fire and spirit, rather larger and stronger in build, and not quite so completely broken. But the boy was none the less pleased at that, as he would have the gratification of taming and curbing the animal himself ; and the purchase once completed, nothing would serve the boys but to try their new steeds. Saddles having been accordingly procured, they set forth together for a gallop across the open country,

and then a return through the noisy streets and lanes of the city.

It was well that Edmund had learned the art of horsemanship from Lord James, and had practised himself in it since on the backs of many an unbroken colt running wild in Hascombe Park. The vagaries of his young steed gave him no anxiety now, and by degrees the creature came to know that he had found his master. By the time the boys had reached home, "Prince Hal," as he had been named, had grown docile, if not exactly quiet.

"In sooth, he makes me think of the prince," said Edmund; "he has the fiery temper, the golden ruddy hair, the spirit and the gaiety of the real Prince Hal. Would we could see him again! Methinks he would not scorn to pause and speak with us, even though we be so much beneath his royal rank. What a day that was, Edgar! And did he not bid us look upon him ever as a friend? If a time should come when we need a friend, I trow he will not forget his plighted word."

"We are scarce likely to need it now," said Edgar. "There is my father; we should go to him in any sort of trouble."

Edmund made no reply. Sometimes there came over him a fear that some trouble might in the future arise from which Lord Hascombe would find it hard to deliver them. From his position in the household, Edmund heard much of the talk that went on amongst the retainers and followers of the earl, some of whom had come over with him from Italy, and had seen there "the princess," as Lady

Hascombe seemed always to be called. From these men the lad was gaining impressions which he did not impart to his foster-brother with the old freedom. There was no shadow between them; their love was strong as ever—almost stronger, since the difference in their positions had been defined; but Edmund felt a scruple of honour in speaking words which might prejudice Edgar against his father's wife. He knew that the relations between them were likely to be difficult enough without that, and though he resolved that his own watch should be unceasing and lynx-like, he would not speak a word to rouse apprehension or uneasiness in his brother's mind. Time enough for them to grow up later, if there should be cause.

And now the lads found that their days of liberty were at an end. Every day there came masters to instruct them in various arts and accomplishments. They had to learn new tricks, and feats of arms, and horsemanship under the tuition of regular instructors; they had to learn to tread the measures of such dances as were then in vogue at court, to acquire the art of bowing gracefully, comporting themselves with dignity and address, and all those numberless small matters that go to make up the sum of good manners. They had also to be instructed in the proper usages of the table; but these had been more or less familiar to them from infancy, as Mary Beetel had herself grown up amid the refinements of a gentleman's household, and had taught her youngest pair all that she herself knew.

Indeed, the lads were apt pupils at all the exercises and

accomplishments taught them, being light of foot, steady of eye, and already partially instructed in many of those things their instructors came to teach.

Edmund received exactly the same training as Edgar—partly because Lord Hascombe had grown exceedingly to like the youth, and believed that he would one day rise to some more exalted position, if he had the chance; partly because Edgar always learned so much faster and more willingly when Edmund was by, and the two could then practise together when the lesson was over.

A few weeks sped by very happily for the boys, who were keenly interested in all they saw in the new life of a nobleman's house, and in their own studies and exercises. From time to time Lord Hascombe would bring home with him some knight, or noble, or ecclesiastic; occasionally ladies would accompany their lords, and sit at his hospitable board, and then the boys had the opportunity of watching their elders eat and talk, themselves more frequently standing behind Lord Hascombe's chair, though occasionally Edgar, or even both of them, would be invited to sit at table.

It was all immensely interesting to both, and in the quick way of observant youth they caught up the words and expressions, even the little gestures and mannerisms, of those they watched, till the earl began to feel with satisfaction that he could present his son in any company, and that Edmund would do him no discredit.

He had been so long absent from the country that his appearance with a grown-up son at his side created

no surprise. All his world remembered the lovely and gracious Lady Geraldine Fitzgerald, the bride of his youth, and were ready to give a welcome to her son, who seemed likely to do her credit. There were a few amongst his old friends who were disposed to take Edmund for the son, and when rallied for this by Lord Hascombe, would reply,—

“The boy has such a look of the Kildares! Surely he, too, is a kinsman!”

Lord Hascombe had no objection for it to be thought that Edmund was a young kinsman of his wife's, and he fell into the habit of calling him so, and speaking of him as a cousin and foster-brother of his boy. It saved questioning, and seemed plausible. And Edmund's eager talk of Lord James to those who knew him, and his tales of how he had learned his first skill in swordsmanship from him, bore out the idea that there was some blood tie between him and the Kildares, however little the lad himself might be aware of it.

So the days and weeks slipped by one after another, and Edgar and Edmund grew used to the life of a great house, to the following of servants, the wearing of apparel that had seemed over-gorgeous at first, to the talk of state matters and of the king and his court; whilst names of great men became familiar to them, and even their faces in time. They knew all about the king's new court of Star Chamber, and were taken to see the room with its decorated roof, and heard great questionings and discussions as to whether or not this institution would be a blessing or a curse to the country.

The old, peaceful, monotonous life at the mill seemed dream-like and unreal to them now. Edmund marvelled how he had ever called it life, and in spite of his love for friends and home he felt that he could never go back to that quiet existence. He had tasted of the deep, rushing river of stormy life; and having so drunk of it, he now felt the magic draught flowing through his veins, whilst a new spirit awoke within him, and he knew that a page in his life's history had been turned for good and all.

Edgar took things more quietly and easily. The stress and storm of the new life had not the same attraction for him as for Edmund, yet it was full of interest of a different kind. He met with men of learning and culture, and he listened eagerly to their talk. Sometimes the interest reflected in his face would attract their attention, and they would notice the boy; and in such cases they were generally struck by his intelligence and his attainments. Lord Hascombe was growing proud of the encomiums passed upon both boys by his friends, and was feeling the happiness of having a son beside him whom he could love freely, and who loved him in return, and with whose affections there was no interfering.

But these days of pleasant and growing friendship between himself and his boy were not destined to last for ever. Letters were one day brought him by a courier with a swarthy face, who spoke a language unknown to the two boys; and upon receipt of them Lord Hascombe's face took a new expression that was half eagerness, half anxiety.

“The princess—Lady Hascombe, as she will be called in this country—has arrived at the port of Dover. She will remain at that place for a few days till I can join her, and until she has recovered from her transit across the sea. Afterwards she will travel by easy stages to London, which place she has long wished to see. I must at once start forth to join her, but I think I must journey alone. I would have liked the company of you lads, but it may be wiser to wait till she has grown used to the knowledge that I have an eldest son. You shall await us here, and continue your studies and exercises until we come. After that, I know not whether Hascombe Hall or this house will be our home. Much depends upon the wishes of Lady Hascombe.”

It was plain that the earl was excited in no small degree by the prospective arrival of his wife. That his feelings were of a somewhat mixed nature could also be detected. That the princess had a very warm place in his heart and a large share of his affections could not be doubted by those who knew Lord Hascombe well; yet a keen reader of character would be aware also of a certain element of fear in this love—a sense of being over-ridden and dominated by his lady, of being less his own master in her presence, less the ruler of his household and his life.

The boys were not a little excited at the news, and would fain have accompanied Lord Hascombe upon the journey; but he decided not to take them, and they must needs submit, though they talked of little else during the days that followed, wondering how the earl fared, how the

meeting with wife and children passed off, and how Lady Hascombe received the tidings that Lady Geraldine's boy had not died, and was now a promising stripling, his father's acknowledged heir.

"Thou must not fear her, Eddie," said Edmund many times in those days of waiting. "Thou must be bold to meet and defy her, if need be. Thou must show her a bold front and a dauntless mien. I fear she will hate thee and wish thee ill; but at least let her not think that thou art one to shrink before her gusts of passion, or be daunted by her jealous whims and rages. She will be like unto no woman thou hast ever seen as yet; but be not afraid, for fear will give her an advantage she will not be slow to take. Meet hate with defiance and with scorn, and she perchance may learn to respect or to fear thee."

Edgar would sigh then, and say,—

"But I would fain live at peace with her, and love her and her children. Why dost thou always talk of her jealousy and malice?"

"I have learned somewhat more of the ways of the world than thou hast, brother," Edmund would reply; "and I have heard more anent this same princess than thou. Is it like that she will patiently see her own boy set aside, as it will seem to her, for a stranger? Nay, but she will be full of jealous rage; and thou must be brave to meet it without faltering, for he who fears is already half defeated."

"Would that thou wert my father's son, and I thy

friend, and kinsman, and esquire," quoth Edgar many times in those days. "I have no love for these battles within the walls of home. Gladly would I yield up my birthright to my young brother, to bring peace and happiness there."

But such a word as that always excited Edmund's wrath.

"A truce to such a thought! It is the thought of a coward and not a soldier, Eddie, and a coward thou must never be. Think of thy father's words; think what he spoke anent this boy. Shall the good manor and broad lands of Hascombe fall to one who is, even in his boyhood, cruel, revengeful, unjust, tyrannical? Rather thank Heaven that thou canst stand betwixt our good folks there and such a future lord. Be bold, bold, bold! Thine is a righteous cause. I ask thee not to show hatred or malice, but only to meet such with a bold and fearless front, so that my lady shall learn respect for her husband's son, and seek neither to cozen nor to browbeat him."

"I will try," was Edgar's final answer on these occasions; "but I would—ah, how much I would—that thou and I could change places! Thou art far fitter to be an earl's son, and I the son of the mill, thy foster-brother and comrade."

"Nay, but I am more fit to fight life's battle than thou," Edmund would answer; "and never fear, Eddie, but that I will. My lady may rage in her disappointment and jealous fury, but she shall not separate thee and me. Together we will stand or fall; and I trust that between

us we shall teach her a lesson she will be slow to forget, or it may be to forgive."

It was perhaps not wonderful, after all this, that Edgar should look forward to the return of his father with a considerable admixture of apprehension and dismay. At the same time, with Edmund beside him, he could not exactly fear for himself or his future; but, as he expressed it to his brother, he was conscious of a sense of oppression, feeling as though some weight hung upon his spirit, as though the days of happy careless boyhood were over, and as though something dark and portentous lay before them in the future.

"Well, we cannot ever be boys," said Edmund, as they stood in the brightly-lighted hall, listening with straining ears for the sound of horse-hoofs which should herald the coming of the approaching cavalcade. A mounted messenger had arrived half an hour or more ago, saying that it was approaching London, and would be at the house before dark. A coach had been obtained to carry the lady and her children the last stage of the long journey, and the whole household was on the alert, the courtyard filled with servants and retainers, and the entire house lighted up and warmed with glowing fires for the reception of the travellers from the sunny lands of the south. October had only run half its course, yet the touch of an early frost was in the air, and the days were drawing in with a visible celerity.

"Hark! I hear them!" cried Edmund, suddenly interrupting himself in what he was going to reply to Edgar's

prognostications. "That is the sound of approaching horses; and see, the courtyard is all alive, the great gates are rolling back. They come! they come!"

Quivering with excitement and eagerness, the two boys stood to receive the arriving party, bare-headed, in the strong light of the warm inner hall. They were aware of a mighty bustle, of voices speaking in a strange language, of the snorting and pawing of horses, and a tumult of welcome and respectful salutation. They heard Lord Hascombe's voice and that of some children, who spoke in the unfamiliar tongue, and seemed to be asking excited questions. Then suddenly out of the picturesque confusion without, over which the flash of torches shed bright conflicting gleams of light, there emerged into view the figure of Lord Hascombe, upon whose arm there leaned a tall, veiled lady, stately of figure, graceful of form, wrapped in rich furs and velvets, who moved slowly, with a certain studied languor, and kept her face quite concealed from view by the black lace covering in which her whole head was shrouded.

Closely following her came servants leading by the hand some children—two little girls and a younger boy—whose big dark eyes looked wonderingly round, seeming half dazzled by the light. Then there sprang up the steps another boy, leading by a leash two huge hounds of a breed unknown to Edmund, though he had some knowledge of dogs—a boy who looked at least fourteen years old, and whose bold, dark face betokened a proud and overbearing nature, as did also the almost insolent haughti-

ness of his voice and manner as he spoke some words to a servant.

He surveyed the hall in which he found himself with a glance of the utmost contempt.

“Is this hole the house we have come all this way to see?” he cried, speaking this time in English, though with an intonation that betrayed his foreign training. “A goodly place, in sooth, for a princess and her children! In Italy, I would not put my dogs in such a wretched hovel!”

Lord Hascombe had just led his wife to a couch beside the glowing fire, and turned now at the words he had heard.

“Peace, Hugo!” he said, somewhat sternly. “We have had enough for one day of thy tongue and thy ill-temper.”

Hugo answered by a scowl that had already left its disfiguring mark upon an otherwise handsome face. He did not answer his father back, but he vented his evil spirit upon one of his dogs, who sprang forward towards Lord Hascombe, as though to get to his side. Hugo snatched his dagger from his belt, and gave the poor brute such a blow with the hilt between the eyes that he uttered a yell and dropped, crouching, on the floor.

Edmund sprang forward and wrenched the leash out of the hands of Hugo, exclaiming with indignant wrath,—

“For shame to treat in that coward fashion a faithful hound that has done naught to deserve it. Give them to me. I will see them housed and fed. But I will not stand by and see them thus ill-treated.”



"For shame to treat in that coward fashion a faithful hound."

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Edmund stopped short, for Hugo had struck him a blow across the mouth; and before he had recovered from the astonishment of the assault, a low, malignant laugh broke from the lady upon the couch.

“That is well done, Hugo!” she exclaimed, speaking with the same foreign ring in her words that had been heard in her son’s. “Show thy elder brother his place forthwith. Let him be never so much Lord Hascombe’s heir, show that thou hast the blood of princes in thy veins, and will teach him his place right speedily, an he thinks to lord it over thee.”

It was a strange scene, and a strange beginning to the new life. Lord Hascombe stood in the centre of the hall, his eyes fixed upon Hugo’s scowling, passionate face. Edmund stood near at hand, holding the great dogs in leash, which seemed to recognize a friend and protector, and laid their heads confidingly against him. His face was pale, save for a red mark across his mouth, and though he was silent, his eyes blazed. In the distant part of the hall, the three younger children, with their Italian attendants, were gathered round the other fire, warming themselves after the cold journey, and paying little heed to aught besides. Edgar stood a few paces behind Edmund, looking on with troubled eyes; and on the couch, her furs and veil a little cast aside, reclined a very dark, beautiful woman, a mocking smile upon her full red lips, a malicious light in her immense dark eyes.

For the space of about half a minute there was a dead silence in this part of the hall; then Edmund turned sud-

denly on his heel and led the dogs away. Hugo made no remonstrance, though he looked after the retreating figure with a malevolent gaze; and Lord Hascombe, starting from his momentary oblivion, took Edgar by the hand and led him towards the couch.

"This is my son, Vittoria," he said. "I trust that in spite of all that has happened, for which I have asked humble pardon, that thou wilt learn to love him when thou dost know him, for my sake first, and then for his own."

Lady Hascombe's glance dwelt carelessly upon the boy for a few seconds, and as he bent his knee before her she gave him her slim olive-tinted hand to kiss, and then looked across towards the door whence Edmund's exit had been made.

"Then who is that other?" she asked.

Lord Hascombe hesitated a moment and then said,—

"A young—kinsman—the friend and companion of Edgar. They have grown up together as brothers."

She gave him a quick, keen glance out of her black eyes, and then let the long lashes droop over them again.

"Oh, another of them," she said, in her low, languid tones, and drew her wraps a little more closely round her.

"How meanest thou, *sposa mia*?" he asked caressingly, grateful for her reception of Edgar, who now stood back, waiting for Edmund's return.

She slightly shrugged her shoulders, and answered in Italian,—

"The 'young kinsman' resembles Lord Hascombe far more than his son. Hadst thou seen thy face and his at

the moment when you both turned upon my Hugo, thou wouldst have well known my meaning. That boy may be Lady Geraldine's son, for all I know—a puny, pale-faced, white-livered lad. The other has the making of a man in him. Thou wouldst have been wiser to take him for the heir.”

Lord Hascombe did not understand, and was made vaguely uneasy by the look on his lady's face and by the mocking light in her eye. It seemed to him that she had some vague plan floating through her mind for disinheriting Edgar and getting her own son set in his stead. But he could not fathom her words, and all he said was spoken very gently and quietly; for, with all his fear and distrust of her, he loved her, and felt her dominating power very strongly whenever they were together.

“Yes, Edgar is truly my first wife's son—my son and heir. I trust that his gentle disposition, so like his mother's, may win thy heart, my Vittoria. Thou wert so good and loving to my Geraldine, that thou wilt love her son for her sake, even though he must be one day my successor. Hugo will have enough without. He will be a richer man than ever Edgar will.”

The princess smiled and said nothing. Lord Hascombe was far from understanding the workings of a really jealous mind.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DIVIDED HOUSE.

FROM the arrival of the princess and her party a perfectly new life began for the foster-brothers in this London home. They scarcely saw Lord Hascombe, who was almost always in the apartments of his wife. The largest and most sumptuous suite in the house had been made ready for her reception; and as the weather for several days after her arrival was cold and inclement, and she and her children were alike wearied by their long journey, they kept themselves rigorously secluded in their separate apartments, and were hardly seen in any other part of the house.

Hugo, however, was an exception. His restless temperament and contemptuous curiosity as to this new country and great city kept him constantly on the move. His swarthy face and scowling black eyes were seen here, there, and all over. He respected the wishes or privacy of no person in the house. He would invade the apartments of Edgar and Edmund, examine their things, speak with slighting mockery of all he saw, provoke Edmund's hot temper, and then let his own blaze

out with that sudden southern ferocity which made him an evident terror to his mother's household.

He seemed to bear an especial grudge against Edmund, and lost no opportunity of offering him petty affront and insult. Edgar he ignored in a fashion that was almost equally offensive. He had evidently been reared up to regard himself as a monarch in miniature, and had never tried to school his temper or control his tongue. He had already made himself hated and feared by those whom he called his servants, and the day was fast approaching when not even father or mother would be able to control him. The princess had insisted on his being spoiled and indulged to the top of his bent through his childhood, and now that boyhood was merging in the early youth of the southern nature, it seemed likely enough that the day of control had passed for ever. Hugo cared for nothing and for nobody. He was his own master, self his idol, the idle caprice of the moment the law of his life.

There was only one person in all that household who appeared to inspire the boy with any sort of respect, and that was an old man who went by the name of Dr. Antonio.

What his position was in the household of the princess the foster-brothers did not know, but he seemed to be something between a physician and an astrologer. It was plain that the servants regarded him with a superstitious reverence and awe; and Hugo remarked one day to Edmund that old Antonio could crumble him to ashes

as he stood, by the glance of his eye, or by the waving of his magic rod. It was plain that he was considered an adept in the black arts, but he appeared in private life as a grave and dignified personage, gentle and courteous in his manners to all. He went about attired in a black velvet gown and cap, and his hair and beard were white as snow. He always carried an ebony cane in his hand, with a crutch of ivory and gold in which a few gems sparkled. It was supposed that some occult power dwelt in that staff, and no one in the house would have dared to touch it, even had it ever left its owner's possession.

Dr. Antonio spent a considerable portion of his time in the apartments of the princess and her children, and was said to be doctoring them and recovering them from the chills of the journey and the climate. At other times he was to be seen pacing the hall or courtyard, asking questions in very pure English of any who happened to be about. He appeared to take a liking to Edgar, who on his side was deeply interested by the conversation of the old man.

"Methinks he knows everything in the wide world," he cried to Edmund with enthusiasm, after a long afternoon spent with the doctor. "There is nothing you can ask that he has not an answer for. And the wonderful, fearful mysteries he has penetrated! I felt the hair rise up on my head as he talked; and yet to him it seemed no more than when we speak of the mill-wheel and the sluices. And he has such wonderful glasses for seeing

the stars! He says that when we go to Hascombe Hall he is to have a chamber in the tower, where he will set them up, and teach me the names of the planets and stars, and tell me things that the sages of old have discovered, and some that he has found out for himself. He is the most wonderful and learned man in all the world, I truly think. I would that thou hadst heard him."

But Edmund had no love for the mysterious old savant, though he would not damp Edgar's pleasure by saying so. Edmund was making friends with some of the Italian servants, and was learning from them some of the tricks of arms and the martial sports that were fashionable in their country. His knowledge of Latin and his quick ear enabled him soon to catch up a few words and phrases, and to make himself understood by them; and they were ready to make speedy friendship with the bright-haired, bright-faced English boy, who was willing, on his part, to do all in his power to make their new life pleasant and easy, and to smooth down any small difficulties that arose betwixt the English servants and themselves.

So whilst Edgar and the doctor would be shut up in some room, poring over books, and imparting or receiving instruction, Edmund would be tilting or fencing, or engaged in some contest of skill or strength in the courtyard, or even on the river—contests in which Hugo would often insist on bearing a share, though his hot temper and insolent method of comporting himself tried Edmund's powers of endurance to the uttermost.

It was a relief to him when one day Lord Hascombe

sought him out, and spoke to him of the future arrangements.

“To-morrow,” he said, “a part of the company will start for Hascombe, and I wish you and Edgar to be of that number. The younger children will travel with you, but Hugo will stay with us. The princess desires to remain a short while still in London, to see some of the buildings and places of which at various times I have told her; but the children will be better in a quieter place and in the fresher air of the country. You will escort them to Hascombe and settle yourselves there; and we shall follow in perhaps one, perhaps two weeks’ time. I look to thee, Edmund, to master thy temper and treat with kindness and courtesy the children who will be under thy care and Edgar’s. I wot well that with Hugo this is something difficult. But the girls and the young boy have not his fiery temper. Thy task should not be so difficult. And hark ye, boy, thou must learn to have a care even with Hugo, else a time may come when Lady Hascombe will call thee a firebrand in the house, a source of trouble and peril to its peace, and I may be forced to send thee elsewhere to complete thy training, and that is a thing I would not willingly be driven to.”

A startled look crossed Edmund’s face. Such a possibility as that had never occurred to him before. Foster-brother to Edgar, given a kinsman’s place in the household, he had believed his position there assured and unassailable. But he saw by the trouble in Lord Hascombe’s face that he meant what he said; he realized

that the power of this princess wife over him was very great. In her presence he was weak, and her personal influence would now be constantly exercised. Edmund had only seen her twice since the first evening, and on each of these occasions he had been conscious that her great black eyes dwelt upon him with singular pertinacity, and with a rather sinister scrutiny. Towards Edgar she showed herself suave and almost caressing, though with a faint undertone of contempt that Edmund noted and was quick to resent. But for him she appeared to have a totally different feeling, and he could only suppose that Hugo was inspiring her with his own jealous enmity, which had been plainly exhibited from the first.

So Edmund was glad enough to be going back to Hascombe. There, surrounded by the free woods and meadow lands, near to the town with its interests and friends, away from the noisy streets, he would lose the sense of constriction that had grown up since the princess and her suite had arrived. Edgar had spoken of a sense of coming ill, but had seemed of late to forget his fears. Instead, they appeared to have transferred themselves to Edmund, who felt a weight upon his spirit at times that made the prospect of the change to Hascombe welcome to him.

The journey would not be a very rapid one, as the first day's travelling was to be taken by the children in the coach, to be finished on horseback upon the day following, as they would then reach the more hilly country that lay around Hascombe for many miles. The days being

now short, travelling was more difficult than it had been earlier in the season, and the roads were in a bad state for coaches, although the strong team of horses provided to draw it would probably accomplish the task in safety.

Edgar and Edmund had hitherto scarcely seen the younger children of Lord and Lady Hascombe, and they looked curiously at them as they were brought out by the attendants and placed in the coach.

Bianca was the rather incongruous name of the elder girl, who was as black-browed and black-eyed as Hugo, and had much of her mother's haughty port and manner, as well as her olive skin. Both the elder children were their mother's all over; it was hard to believe that the fair-haired, blue-eyed Lord Hascombe could be their father. But in the little seven-year-old Geraldine the English blood showed clearly. True, her eyes were somewhat dark, though not black like those of brother and sister, and without the hardness of expression to be seen there; but her hair was of a bright golden hue—as bright as Edgar's had been at her age—and it was not confined by snood or kerchief, but floated round her like a golden nimbus, and was her father's pride and delight. She had the fair, transparent skin that often accompanies golden hair, and the colour came and went in her cheeks with every passing phase of emotion, as in Edgar's. There were dimples in cheek and chin, and a merry little smile would often break over her face as she would look archly up through her long dark lashes to see what other people thought of her mirth. Edmund smiled as the

child's glance met his, and he approached to tuck the great boar-skin rug more cosily about her little feet. She rewarded him with a smile; but Bianca gave him a darkly suspicious look, and said somewhat sharply,—

“Make way, boy; they are going to bring Otto to sit with us.”

Otto was the youngest of the children, and though not so fair as little Geraldine, he was nothing like so dark as the other pair. He was a fine child, and already he and Geraldine were devoted to each other. It seemed to Edmund easy to forecast that, as the children grew up, there would be two parties in that house—one the mother's, and one the father's.

It was a relief to him to find that Dr. Antonio was remaining behind, in attendance upon the princess. It had been uncertain to the last which party he would accompany, as Lady Hascombe wished him to be with the children and yet to keep him for herself. Edgar was a little disappointed, as he was impatient to see the setting up of the astronomer's instruments in the tower, and would have enjoyed his conversation upon the journey; but he consoled himself by promising to have everything ready at Hascombe when the other party should arrive, and noted down sundry instructions from Dr. Antonio as to the aspect and situation best suited to his purpose.

The first day's travelling was somewhat tedious for the horsemen, who had to accommodate their pace to the slow-travelling coach, and sometimes to dismount to put their shoulders to the wheel, in a literal sense, when

the ground was very soft and marshy, and the cumbersome vehicle stuck fast in the mire.

At the last halt for this sort of service, the inn where they were to sleep being but three miles distant, little Geraldine held out her arms to Edmund, and cried,—

“Take me up on your beautiful horse, and let me ride with you.”

Bianca made a hasty movement as if to stop this arrangement, but already Edmund had the child in his arms, and had swung her to his saddle-bow. He vaulted behind her, and holding her fast, he wrapped her warmly in his travelling cloak, and set his horse to the steady hand-gallop for which the eager creature was pining.

The little maiden laughed with glee. She seemed to know no fear, and the rapid motion after the lumbering and jolting of the coach was delightful to her, as was the fresh, cool air fanning her face.

“Bianca is like our mother: she likes it hot, with all the windows shut up fast. Father and I like cold, but mother always gets her own way. Are you my big English brother?”

“No, not exactly; but I am a sort of brother to him. We have grown up together always. He is just behind. Look over my shoulder and you will see him. I can hear his horse coming on behind.”

“I see him,” answered the child. “He is like you; but I like you best. I wish you were our brother.”

“You will like Edgar best when you know him. I have a bad temper.”

“Not as bad as Hugo’s,” said Geraldine, with an air of finality. “Dominique says that Hugo has got his temper from the devil, and that the devil looks out of his eyes sometimes. Hugo has killed a man, and he has had people whipped till they nearly died; and he shut up his dogs once and would have starved them to death, but I got in and took them food every day, and he got frightened that they did not die, and thought they were bewitched. I think he will be angry that the dogs like you best. He is very proud of them, but he is very cruel. They will never go with him unless he has them on leash; but see how they follow you!”

The hounds, in fact, were racing alongside the horse. They had been led by a servant for the early part of the journey, as Lord Hascombe wished them to be taken into the country; but since the mid-day meal Edmund had had them loose, for they had become much attached to him, and would follow him anywhere. He looked at them now bounding joyously along, and called them by the English names of Ranger and Rover, which he had given them.

“You will not let Hugo starve them or hurt them any more, will you?” asked the little girl.

“I’ll soon take care of that,” answered Edmund between his shut teeth. “Your brother Hugo may have been master in your fine Italian castle, of which he speaks so proudly; but Lord Hascombe is master of Hascombe Hall, and Edgar is his heir, and Hugo will have no power

there; and if he tries his coward foreign cruelty in free England—well, he shall perhaps have a taste of it himself for a lesson in manners.”

“Oh!” cried Geraldine, drawing in her breath in wonder and a sort of awe; “I think you must be a knight-errant, or a saint on a church window, with a flaming sword. I don’t think father himself would dare to say such things of Hugo.”

Edmund gave a little short laugh.

“It needs no such mighty courage, little cousin, to set an upstart lad like Hugo in his place.”

“Call me little sister, not little cousin,” said Geraldine, in the imperious fashion which all her children had inherited in some degree from the princess. “If thou art Edgar’s brother, thou must also be mine; for our father tells us that Edgar is our big English brother.”

The friendship of little Geraldine, begun upon that evening, was continued all the next day, when, the coach having been sent back to London, the party continued their journey on horseback.

Geraldine insisted upon being Edmund’s especial charge. She had a strong little pony, which she rode well and easily, and she put herself under the care of her “new brother,” sometimes asking him to carry her for a while as he had done on the previous evening, and anon begging to be allowed to walk on her own feet, and letting some servant lead their horses.

It was his pleasure to humour her, and he found her a very winsome little maiden, whilst she on her part declared

that she would have him for her brother whether or not, and that Bianca might have Edgar for hers.

Bianca had come out of her sullen fit to-day, and finding it rather dull to hold aloof, had made a companion of Edgar, who was eager to win the friendship and affection of his new relatives, for she was not altogether ignorant of the advantage of being on more friendly terms with her father's eldest son.

She resented the advent of this new brother not a little; but her mother had told her that there was nothing for it but to make the best of the matter, and see how things turned out. Bianca had a great opinion of her mother's ability and powers, and she did not believe that any obstacle to Hugo's advancement would be likely to remain long in his path. She would find a way of installing him in what she considered his rightful position. But meantime it was more amusing to see what sort of a brother she had got, and to follow her mother's example of treating him with a certain tolerant friendliness.

So the day's riding was rather agreeable to them all. The sun shone, the birds sang, the sky was blue overhead, and the wind blew softly from the south. Geraldine exclaimed that England was a great deal prettier than Italy, and that they never had beautiful red and golden trees, but only dull olive groves and shining orange and lemon trees. She wanted to know the names of each one as they rode along, and to get down and kick her little feet in the crimson leaves, laughing aloud in childish glee.

It was still broad daylight when they approached Has-

combe Hall, and the boys saw a very great difference in the place since their departure.

It was a fine large house, built in the form of a double quadrangle, and with battlemented turrets and strong walls, such as the houses of the nobles needed to have in those days, when an Englishman's house had so often to be his castle of defence. Hitherto the boys had known it as a lonely place, standing neglected in the midst of its woods and park-like glades and grounds. But to-day all seemed changed in some indescribable fashion. There was an air of habitation to be seen even in the long approach to the house. Grass no longer grew upon the road, but sand and stones had been laid down and trodden in, and the overhanging trees had been cut back, so that riders no longer had to duck their heads to get by.

As they approached the house quite a retinue of servants advanced to meet them. They were escorted into the great courtyard, which was no longer grass-grown and desolate, but resounded with the sounds of active life. The windows of the house, hitherto dim and dull, overgrown with ivy, broken, and crusted with cobwebs, were now bright and clear. Doors stood open, showing life within doors. Huge logs blazed upon the hearth in the big old hall, where the armour had been polished, and the panelling rubbed till it shone anew.

Familiar as the foster-brothers had been with the stately old house, they could scarcely restrain a cry of wonder and delight as they realized how fair and stately a place it could be. And the little Geraldine did not hesitate

to exclaim with delight and wonder, as she ran hither and thither, holding by Edmund's hand, and bidding him tell her what everything meant and what everything was called in this strange new place.

The days that followed were really happy ones for Edmund and Edgar. Their new relations, away from the immediate influence of their mother, showed themselves childlike and amiable. Bianca's temper was slightly irritable and overbearing, but it was easy for the boys to give way to a little girl; and, in spite of her airs of maturity, Bianca was but ten; while Hugo was but twelve, notwithstanding his looks and pretensions.

They ran about the big rambling house, so different from the Italian palace in which they had grown up; they wandered in the woods, and down to the mill. They enjoyed Mary Beetel's cakes and elderberry wine, and listened eagerly to the tales that the big brothers told them of the things they had done and seen whilst they lived with Mary at the mill.

The children never troubled to inquire Edmund's exact claim to kinship with themselves. Geraldine had adopted him as a brother, and Bianca condescended to be gracious, though in a less outspoken way. Edgar and Edmund were so delighted to be back again amid the familiar sights and sounds of home that they were as joyous as the day was long, and took the little ones everywhere with them, Geraldine declaring that Gadhelm was a much finer and nicer place than London, and making great havoc of the hearts of the mayor and burgesses by her winsome sayings and doings.

When the closing daylight drove them within doors, Edmund would institute games and romps such as were played in those days, as they have been by children of all ages. Different games of ball, a sort of blind-man's buff, and the inevitable hide-and-seek were the favourite sports, and the two great hounds joined in all the games with a zest that was thought delightful.

But Edgar had another occupation, which was the preparation of one of the great square turrets at the corner of the house for the study, laboratory, and observatory of Dr. Antonio. Bianca was also interested in this matter, and would often go and look on, telling Edgar stories about the old man which were calculated to curdle the blood in his veins, had he believed them all.

But Geraldine and Otto could never be persuaded so much as to mount the stairs that led to the place where these preparations were going on.

"We might meet his ghost or his familiar spirit," she whispered to Edmund, when pressed to know why. "He is a wicked old man. He is a friend of the devil. He sees things that happen miles and miles away, and he knows what people are thinking about before they speak. People have seen him riding in the sky on stormy nights on a great bat with huge wings. If he wants anybody to die, that person just dwindles away. If he wants to cure anybody who is ill, he can. He has all sorts of things in his bottles. Dominique says he gets little babies and sucks their blood, and goes on living for ever and ever. I hate him. I won't have him touch me, if I

can't help it. Mother likes him, but I don't think father does."

Edmund would have liked to know more about Dr. Antonio, whose personality and reputation perplexed and disquieted him; but little Geraldine's ideas were so incoherent, so mixed up with folly and wild superstition, that he could attach no great weight to her words. It was evident that the old man had been a member of the princess's household for very many years now. Geraldine thought he had been "for ever and ever" in the service of her mother's family, and that he had always been just as old as he was now, and never grew any older.

Bianca was more reticent on the subject, and spoke in a very different fashion. She thought Dr. Antonio the greatest scholar in the world, and had tales to tell how wise and learned men of all nations came to him, or sent letters by special couriers to seek his counsel and advice. Her mother thought well of him. He was the most devoted servant a great family ever had. He might have made himself a place in kings' courts, but he had always remained devoted to her and to those of her name and race.

Edgar would join in praise of the old man's extraordinary learning, whilst Geraldine would sit perfectly still, looking as quietly unconvinced as child could look, yet in her sister's presence never uttering a word on the subject, only casting a look at Edmund from time to time, as much as to say that all this did not shake her one whit.

At last the family was once more reunited, and a dif-

ferent sort of life began forthwith. With Lady Hascombe came the train of foreign servants; Dr. Antonio moved here and there about the house, examining and admiring, seeking to learn its history and to master its complicated structure. Hugo came, insolent and intolerant of restraint or correction, and scarcely a day went by without some collision between him and Edmund.

The devotion of the two handsome hounds was the first ostensible rock of offence. The great creatures, now devoted to their new master, would have none of Hugo's authority; and their spirit having returned, now that they lived in an atmosphere of kindness, they no longer crouched and cowered before Hugo's savage words and threats, but showed their fangs and growled at his approach, till he became absolutely frantic with rage, and vowed he would string them up and lash them to death if they returned not to their allegiance.

"That you shall never do!" cried Edmund with flashing eyes. "Remember you are no prince or tyrant here. You are reaping what you have sown. The dumb brutes do but give you back in kind what you have given them. Dare to lay a finger upon them in wanton cruelty, and you shall answer to me for it first, and to your father afterwards."

Hugo's eyes flashed fire.

"Dare to speak thus to me, thou base-born knave! I will have thy insolent tongue cut out and served thee for thy supper!"

Edmund, with a word of contempt, turned on his heel

and went away, the dogs bounding after him. Hugo stood with a scowl upon his face, and gnawed his lip till the blood came.

Another time, meeting Edmund and the dogs out in the woods, another altercation followed, and Hugo suddenly drawing his new-fashioned rapier from its sheath, made a wild lunge at one of the hounds, so swift and stealthy that he caught the poor brute on the shoulder, inflicting a long wound that, had it been aimed a little differently, must have pierced its heart.

But retribution was not far to seek, for, with a savage bay that had something almost human in it, the other hound leaped at his throat; and Hugo's yell was an awful echo of that of the wounded hound, as he saw the gleam of wild-beast eyes close against his own, and felt the hot breath upon his cheek.

Edmund was quick to spring to the rescue and drag off the dog, but not before Hugo's neck had been well grazed by the creature's fangs, and his dress torn and stained, and even smeared slightly with blood.

"Coward!" cried Edmund with flashing eyes; "well would you have been served had I let the brute tear you in pieces! Take you heed for the future, Hugo; my patience is not everlasting. There may come a day when you will provoke me too far, and I will not intervene to hold back the punishment you so richly merit. Begone, and let us have no more of your evil temper."

For the moment the boy was cowed, and he slunk away willingly, casting fearful glances over his shoulder towards

the spot where Edmund stood holding back the angry hound, whilst the injured dog crouched at his feet, licking the wound he had received.

Edmund took him to one of the falconers, and got assistance in tending the wound; whilst Hugo rushed to his mother in a tempest of passion, pouring out his version of the tale, which, even if the princess did not believe it, she was ready enough to accept.

"I will not have that fellow here! I will not! I will not!" he raved, his passion rising as his fear abated. "He insults me, he injures me, he thwarts me at every turn. Tell our father to turn him out; let him go whence he came; none wants him here. He is no son; why should he remain to be the pest of the house? I am not to be flouted by a base-born churl. Tell my father so, and let him go. If not, I shall kill him one of these days, if he kill not me."

"Who talks of killing?" spoke Lord Hascombe's voice in the doorway, as he lifted the hangings and entered his wife's apartment.

She made Hugo a sign to take himself away, which he did, with lowering brow, muttering in his mother's ear,—

"He never used to speak to me so. It is all the doing of yon brother of mine and his shadow. I hate them both."

Lady Hascombe looked full into her husband's face.

"It is time to talk of killing when thou dost keep about thee in thy household one who has sought to take Hugo's life this very day."

"What mean you?" asked Lord Hascombe quickly.

"No more than I say. Edmund, your youthful kinsman, set the dogs upon Hugo only an hour ago, and he had much ado to escape with his life, by defending himself with his rapier. There has been ill blood betwixt them from the first. Hugo is hot, as thou dost know, as I have never denied. He will not brook such treatment. It comes to this, that either Edmund must go or Hugo. Thou wilt have to choose betwixt thine own son and mine, and this young kinsman of thine, whom thou hast reared with thine own son."

Lady Hascombe spoke the last words very slowly, her eyes fixed full upon the stern and troubled face of her husband. He paced up and down the room in silence for a while, and gave no answer. At last he said,—

"I must see Hugo, and I must see Edmund. This is a thing I will not decide hastily. There may be another side to the story, Vittoria. Hast thou never known Hugo speak a word in his haste that he cannot afterwards affirm?"

A dark frown crossed Lady Hascombe's face.

"Do as thou wilt, my lord," she said with an air of haughty displeasure, "but be warned by me. That boy Edmund is as the viper thou hast warmed by thine own fire. There will be no peace in this house so long as he remains."

"Will there be peace if he goes?" was the thought of Lord Hascombe's heart; but he gave it no voice.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STEPMOTHER'S POLICY.

LORD HASCOMBE made inquiry respecting the quarrel between the two boys. Edmund told his tale frankly and openly, with an air of candour that carried conviction. Hugo's narrative had gained in virulence, as it had gained in improbability. Lord Hascombe as he listened felt a growing repulsion towards this son of his, who seemed to have neither conscience nor honour when his passions were aroused, and whose southern violence and heat were painfully out of place amid his present surroundings.

But there was corroboration of Edmund's story in quite an unexpected quarter. Geraldine and little Otto had been spectators of the whole affray, crouching frightened and trembling in the bushes. They of their own accord came to their father with the tale; and the truth thus established without possibility of doubt, Lord Hascombe went to his wife, told her the whole state of the case, and warned her, in somewhat more forcible language than was his wont, that if Hugo continued in these untruthful habits he should certainly punish him, since, if not corrected in youth, the vice would grow upon him till his character was ruined.

A gleam came into Lady Hascombe's eyes as she heard these words. Hugo was the apple of her eye. She neither could nor would see fault in him. What mattered it if he did bring a false accusation against a boy who was always angering him, setting him at defiance, interfering with his pleasures? She quoted a hundred instances where Edmund had vexed and thwarted him. Edmund's temper and pride were the bane of the house. In time her husband would come to see it for himself, and be sorry he had taken sides against his own son. And who was this lad that he should occupy such a position? Foster-brother to Edgar, forsooth! Did that give him the right to take such airs upon him? A kinsman, perchance! Lady Hascombe gave a sharp look at her husband, and a rather evil flash showed in her eyes. As though every kinsman of a great house had a right to such privileges! He would find out his mistake, when perhaps it would be too late.

For the present this sort of talk had small effect upon Lord Hascombe. He liked Edmund, and thought well of him; he and Edgar were absolutely devoted, even though they were often following different pursuits and objects. The younger children had adopted him as another brother, and would not hear a word against him; they openly declared their preference for Edmund, though they were very fond of Edgar too. These four together made a natural and pleasant element in the house. The big lads romped with the little children up and down the innumerable staircases and through the endless corridors and rooms of the great house; they took them out into

the woods, and taught them the names and habits of the wild creatures there. When the frost and snow came, turning the world into such a fairy-land as the southern children had never dreamed of, they took them sledging and sliding. Geraldine's cheeks began to glow like those of a village maiden; her eyes were as bright as stars; her great mane of golden hair, rebelling against all attempts at confinement, would float round her like a cloud. Her father, proud of her beauty, and delighted that one of his little ones should be so thoroughly English, did everything in his power to encourage these healthy outdoor sports; and even Hugo could not but join in them sometimes, although his presence was by no means a source of added pleasure, as it almost invariably led to some sort of strife or collision.

Nothing seemed able to teach Hugo the chivalry of the strong towards the weak. With him might was right, and he tyrannized over every creature he came near that was weaker than himself. No matter whether it were an animal, a child, a servant, he delighted to show his power, and to show it by teasing, bullying, tormenting. His capacity for inflicting pain, and enjoying the sight of it, was a trait that was increasingly marked, and which stirred Edmund's wrath within him to the utmost.

Edgar was equally indignant when he saw these things; but Edgar was not always able to share the outdoor life of the rest. For the first time in his life he seemed to show symptoms of delicacy, which reminded Lord Hascombe of the insidious malady which had carried off his first

beloved wife in her early maturity ; and he watched them with a jealous eye, resolved that every care should be taken to check and counteract them.

Dr. Antonio was consulted, and he advised a certain care during the inclement weather, less exposure to cold, and keeping as far as possible in a room of an equable temperature.

This was easily managed, for Edgar's great delight was to ensconce himself in the great library where all the books and parchments were stored, and where Dr. Antonio had taken up his abode, when not in his own especial tower. The learned man had fitted this room with a stove of his own design, which gave out a steady and pleasant warmth that diffused itself throughout the place, and permeated it with a peculiar aromatic perfume which was rather agreeable, and which he declared was exceedingly valuable in cases like Edgar's. He also burned pine-cones in the stove and the gum of the fir-trees, and Edgar would declare that it was almost as good as being out in the woods to inhale the fragrance thus created.

He was deep in the studies fostered by Dr. Antonio, who spoke to Lord Hascombe in flattering terms of his son's great capacity for learning. Nothing came amiss to Edgar, and he was consoled even for the temporary separation from Edmund day by day by the delights of drinking so deeply from the fountain of learning. The occasional physical languor he experienced prevented his longing very greatly for the pastimes he had been wont to share with his comrade. He felt as though he had spent

almost too much time in play and sport of various kinds, and was now ready to give his mind to more serious matters, rejoicing in having so keen and finished a scholar as Dr. Antonio always at his side to help and guide him.

It was one great satisfaction to Lord Hascombe that his wife never exhibited towards Edgar any of that jealous animosity she showed towards Edmund. On the contrary, she seemed rather fond of him, would get him to sit beside her couch in the evenings and tell her of his day's doings, or bring his lute, or some other musical instrument, and play and sing to her. To her husband she always spoke of him as "a very proper youth," or an "excellent lad, who would be a great scholar in time;" and she occasionally observed that it seemed a pity he could not enter the church, as he would undoubtedly find his true vocation there.

Lady Hascombe never stirred abroad during the winter weather. She had all the luxurious languor of the south in her temperament. She kept huge fires of logs blazing everywhere about the house, and in her own apartments foreign stoves as well. She lived in an atmosphere of perfume and warmth; and Bianca, who was her mother's child in all things, was seldom far from her side.

She had brought over her own priest and father confessor, who said mass and performed other offices of the church in the chapel belonging to the Hall; and thither Lady Hascombe resorted almost daily, for she was punctilious in observing the forms of the religion in which she had been brought up. All the household attended the chapel

service, although on Sundays Edmund would always take his way through the snow-encumbered paths to the town, to be present at the service in the church which he had attended regularly as a boy. There was something about the services of the chapel that grated upon him, he knew not why. Mass was mass all the world over; and the Reformation had not yet made its protest, sweeping away ancient forms and usages, and establishing a different standard of worship. Yet there was something about the Italian priest and his method that sent slight thrills of revolt through Edmund's frame. He rebuked himself at times, thinking it perhaps some temptation of the evil one; but he could seldom free himself from the feeling. He was not theologian enough to distinguish between priesthood and priestcraft, and yet this was the key to his feeling of discontent and disgust. He only knew that when the good old priest, who lived for and loved his flock, stood before them to do his office of worship at the altar, he could bow his head and join in that act of worship with a humble and grateful heart; whereas, when the dark Italian, with his gorgeous vestments, almost inaudible voice, his ever-recurring and bewildering genuflections, kissings, gesticulations, and "censings," performed the same rite, he felt in some sort like an outsider and an alien, and did not even wish to penetrate into the mystery and learn the meaning of it all.

Edgar told him that the Pope of Rome issued certain orders from time to time, which the priests from Italy knew and obeyed, so that the worship became more

ornate and full of ceremony. But Edmund remarked that he did not see what England had to do with the Pope at Rome; she had her own bishops and archbishops, who could teach the people what they ought to know. England had never been under the dominion of the Pope, so far as he had heard, and had always revolted against papal tyranny. He knew that much, though not so learned as Edgar; and Edgar assented readily, being at heart a true lover of liberty, though his passion for beauty and his devotional nature made it easier for him to accept a florid style of worship than it was for the hardier and less imaginative Edmund.

The prior of Gadhelm was now a constant visitor to Hascombe Hall, and Edmund regarded those visits with suspicion and dislike, though upon that matter Lord Hascombe would suffer him no liberty of speech. He had had cause already to rebuke what he called Edmund's lack of reverence for holy things and holy men, and if the boy's lip curled in scorn at hearing such a title bestowed upon the haughty prior of Gadhelm, he kept his scorn to himself, or only spoke of it to Edgar, for he would not say a word to the younger children that he felt their parents would not approve.

Nevertheless it was not possible for him to conceal his sentiments beyond a certain point; and on more than one occasion Lord Hascombe had been displeased by the boy's haughtiness of demeanour in presence of the prior, whilst Lady Hascombe had watched it with a meaning light in her eyes.

"Thy young kinsman shows not a very pious and proper temper where Holy Church is concerned," she remarked once to her husband; "I hear it from my good father, as well as what we see for ourselves. He absolutely refuses to confess to him, or receive his godly admonitions. He prefers a tramp of a couple of miles through the snow, if indeed he ever confesses at all. It is well that thy son shows a different spirit. But were I Edgar's father, I should fear the influence of that strong nature upon him as he grows up."

"Edmund is but a boy; he will learn better as he grows older," answered Lord Hascombe quickly.

"And the boy is father to the man, as your English proverb runs," retorted his wife.

But it was Hugo who cast, as it were, a firebrand into their midst one day, provoking an immediate explosion, and laying the foundation in Lord Hascombe's mind of a determination which he carried out a little later.

Hugo had for long held the town of Gadhelm in lofty contempt, and had scarcely been within its walls; but latterly, having wearied of the games and pastimes in the immediate vicinity of the house, and desiring further amusement, he had taken to paying visits there with his own attendants, and had by degrees come to pick up a good many items of local news and local gossip.

From one of these excursions he hurried home with flushed cheeks and flaming eyes, and bursting in upon his mother, he broke out into excited and furious speech.

"Mother, mother, dost thou know that we are grossly

cozened? Yon lad whom our father calls his young kinsman is none of his blood whatsoever. He is the son of the miller of Hascombe Mill. He lived all his life till the past year as a burgher boy. He is nothing but a base-born churl; and I, who am the son of a princess and an earl, am bidden to sit at meat with him!"

Hugo was almost choking in his fury. His mother regarded him with a peculiar stealthy smile in her great dark eyes. She hesitated, and seemed for a moment as though she would speak; but at that moment she became aware that they were not alone. Lord Hascombe had been writing in an inner room, and had come slowly out in time to hear this outburst on the part of Hugo.

His face was rather pale and stern. He had not exactly desired to deceive his wife and family in speaking as he had done of Edmund as a kinsman. He had come to feel towards the boy exactly as though he were a blood relation, and it galled him to the quick to hear his son charge him, as it were, with deceit, and use such expressions towards Edgar's foster-brother. But how would his wife take the news? His first glance was to her, and he was relieved to see her leaning back amongst her cushions, with something of a smile upon her face, though there was a certain feline stealth and cunning in that smile.

She looked at her husband through her narrowed eyes, and made a gesture with her hands.

"Thou must pacify the boy, husband mine," she said in Italian, with a little laugh. "For me, I have known it

long enough. I have never had any doubt as to Edmund's parentage."

"You knew he was base-born, and told me not, but let me be insulted and browbeaten by him!" shouted Hugo, beside himself.

Lord Hascombe's hand was upon his shoulder; for the first time in his life Hugo received a stinging box on the ear. The astonishment of the smart kept him silent a moment, but inwardly he was boiling over with rage.

"Who has told thee the tale, Vittoria?" asked Lord Hascombe.

"My good friend the prior knows all," answered Lady Hascombe carelessly; "but Dr. Antonio had told me long since that things were not as they seemed. Thou dost know how he can cast horoscopes, and learn the things that are hidden from others."

"Send him away! send him away!" suddenly shouted Hugo, mad with passion. "Send him away ere I kill him! A miller's son! Saprìsti! I will slay him ere I sit at meat with him again. A base-born churl, without one drop of gentle blood in his veins! Father, thou dost wrong us all to pass him off as kinsman. Let Edgar have him, an he will, for his servant and slave; but for us to call him cousin—brother! By the blood of the mass, I will plunge my dagger in his heart, ere sister of mine shall so disgrace herself!"

The boy was almost foaming at the mouth with passion. Lady Hascombe signed to her husband to leave him to her. It would have given Lord Hascombe exquisite pleasure at

that moment to have taken Hugo by the ears, to have administered a sound thrashing then and there, and to have locked him up on a bread-and-water diet for a week ; but he had too long given his wife her own way in the management—or mismanagement—of her elder children to begin to take drastic measures now, and with a muttered exclamation of anger and disgust he walked from the room, and almost instinctively went in search of Edmund, as though to seek some sort of consolation there.

He was not long in coming upon the boy, whose flushed, excited face and sparkling eyes told that he too had been through some recent and stirring experience.

Directly he saw Lord Hascombe he came hastily towards him.

“Good my lord,” he cried between panting breaths, “knowest thou where Hugo is?”

“What dost thou want with Hugo?” asked Lord Hascombe in some surprise, for the lads were not wont to seek each other out.

“I want to fight him, to punish him, to administer to him such a chastisement as he shall not soon forget!” cried Edmund with scintillating eyes.

“What has he done?” asked Lord Hascombe, realizing that his wife had not spoken without warrant when she had warned him that there would be trouble between the boys yet.

“He has half killed Wild Will!” cried Edmund, hot in his wrath. “Dost thou know Wild Will?—a harmless fellow for the most part, though I deny not that he

will steal when he gets the chance ; but he knows no better—his wits are not like ours. He has met us in the woods many times. Hugo has scoffed and jeered him, and raised his anger, for he cannot bear laughter and mockery. It reminds him—but no matter that. He fears and hates Hugo, as his dogs and all weak things fear and hate him. Once he got into a tree, and flung mud and pebbles at him ; another time he pelted him with snowballs ; yet he never hurt him : it was but as a child seeks to avenge himself upon his mockers. But what think you I found to-day ? ”

“ Nay, I know not,” answered Lord Hascombe rather wearily.

Edmund’s eyes were blazing ; his breath came thick and short.

“ I found Wild Will tied up to a tree half naked, his back all torn and bleeding from the scourging he had received, though the blood had wellnigh frozen on, for it was last evening the thing was done. He has been hanging there all night half mad with pain, and Hugo and his minions who did the deed would have left him there to die of thirst and cold had I not chanced to pass that way, and Prince Hal scented blood, and grew so restive, I was forced to lead him to see what it was so scared him. I have taken him to his mother ; she recovered him, and he told us his tale. Now I come to chastise Hugo. Would that I could do to him as he has done ! ”

But Lord Hascombe caught Edmund by the arm and forcibly detained him. He looked down for full two minutes into the boy’s face, deeply flushed by anger, full

of its passion of pity, indignation, and resolve, and then he spoke very gravely and seriously.

“Edmund, dost thou acknowledge me as a kinsman, as a master, as thy lord, to whom thou dost owe obedience?”

Edmund looked him squarely in the eyes.

“You are Edgar’s father, good my lord,” he answered, as though that were reply enough.

“And thou art Edgar’s brother in love, therefore thou dost owe me duty and obedience too. Then this I say to thee: go to thy mother at once—to the mill—and abide there till I come and speak with thee upon this and other matters. It is not fitting to-day that thou and Hugo should meet. Go thy way, asking no question. Leave this matter in my hands; I will not forget it. Go thou to the mill, and abide there till I come. If not upon the morrow, it shall not be later than the day following.”

“May I say farewell to Edgar?”

“I would rather thou didst go at once. I will explain all to Edgar.”

Edmund turned at once, and walked firmly away. He never paused till he had reached his former home. Then throwing himself down at Mary Beetel’s knees, he told her all his tale, and how Lord Hascombe had bidden him remain with her till he had decided how to punish Hugo, when it would be safe for them to meet again.

That was all the thought in Edmund’s mind—that they were to be kept apart whilst his own anger burned so hotly. He even felt that the request was not without reason. Had he met Hugo in his present mood, he could scarcely have

answered for consequences, and his soberer thoughts told him that Lady Hascombe would not soon forgive an injury done to her firstborn.

Indeed, after a quiet afternoon spent at the mill with his first parents and friends, Edmund was willing to recognize that in his gusts of anger and passion there was sin, although he had had ample provocation from Hugo, and he would ever regard an act of wanton cruelty to a defenceless creature as a thing abhorrent and vile.

“I will confess my fault to our good priest to-morrow,” said Edmund, as he bid Mary good-night before going up to the familiar sleeping-room that had been his and Edgar’s for so many happy years; “I will confess my fault, and receive absolution, and do my penance, and on Sunday I will receive the communion if I am permitted, and then perchance when I see Hugo again I may command my evil temper; albeit I will not seek to condone his sin, for it is very grievous, and it angers me the more that he cares not for it, and would do the same again. But I am not his judge nor his lord; I must seek to remember that.”

Edmund carried out his resolution faithfully, with the result that upon the morrow he lay prostrate in the church for many hours, extended in the form of a cross, meditating on the patience and gentleness of the Saviour, and seeking to have a share in that patience, even towards the unthankful and evil.

Lord Hascombe did not appear that day at the mill; and on the next, which was Sunday, Edmund received the holy communion in the clear, early light of a golden February

dawn, and walked homewards afterwards full of good resolutions for the future—resolutions to be patient under provocation, to keep back the outward expression of passion, and to show dutiful submission to those in authority, even when they seemed to be acting with injustice towards him. And in his heart he was thinking mainly of Hugo and his mother, for they were the elements of difficulty and danger in his path, and he was more or less aware of the fact.

It was in the afternoon of that day that Lord Hascombe appeared, and there was a certain look of care and anxiety upon his face that was quickly noted by Edmund, who, however, waited to be spoken to before speaking. He had half expected to see Edgar by his father's side, but Lord Hascombe noted his glance of inquiry, and shook his head.

"I thought better to come alone," he said, "but thou shalt see Edgar again ere we take our departure."

"Our departure?" asked Edmund quickly. "Good my lord, whither do we go?"

"To Italy, my lad, thou and I, and some others in our company. Listen, Edmund, and seek for patience and submission, as Edgar has done. Thou must know well that things cannot continue as they are now. The peace of the house is disturbed; it is a house divided against itself; and the fault is partly thine, Edmund. Nay, I am not unjust. I know that Hugo is more in fault than thou; but Hugo is my son and Lady Hascombe's, and thou art—"

"The son of the miller of Hascombe," said Edmund, with a sort of proud humility. "Ay, I know that well; I understand."

"Thou art dear to Edgar as a brother, and dear to me for his sake and thine own; nevertheless, my lad, I cannot hide from thee that thou art also a cause of trouble. My wife does complain that she can win no love from Edgar, because thou art ever at his side, prompting him to distrust and to hate her."

"That is not true," began Edmund, with sudden heat, but stopped instantly, mindful of his promise and his penance.

"I am glad that it is not," said Lord Hascombe. "Nevertheless there is this much truth in it, that with thee beside him, Edgar seems to have no love for any besides. Thou art the centre of all his thoughts—even I, his father, have felt it sometimes; but letting that be, there is cause enough for the resolve I have made. For a time thou must leave Hascombe Hall. For a time I must needs leave it myself. There has come news from Italy that obliges me to travel thither. The princess and the young children cannot make the long journey again so soon. I cannot leave you boys together—you and Hugo; and his mother will not part with him. But I would fain have thee as my companion, Edmund. Thou wilt see something of the world; thou wilt travel by land and by sea, and learn many strange, new things. Thou art hardy and strong, and I shall be the happier for the sight of thy familiar face at my side. So I have decided, and I have come to tell thee the news. Thou and I start for the coast upon the morrow. We shall take ship at Southampton by some vessel bound for the port of Genoa. It will be a less difficult journey than the

one by land across France, with the melting snows, and the wolves hungry and fierce from the long winter famine. We may be delayed by wind and storm, but I trow we shall get to our journey's end the quicker; and thou wilt learn what the sea is like, and have a sight of the world beyond thine own native shores."

Edmund's breath was quite taken away by the suddenness of the proposal and by the finality of Lord Hascombe's tone. A few months ago the thought of the separation from Edgar would have seemed an impossibility; but of late they had spent much time apart, and Edgar had a friend in the old doctor, who, little as Edmund had been disposed to like him, seemed to be really fond of the young aspirant for learning, and ready to care for the welfare of his body, as well as to give instruction to his mind.

The thought of foreign travel could not but quicken the blood in his veins, but his first question was the one Lord Hascombe had expected.

"But wherefore not Edgar too? Should he not see foreign lands also?"

"All in good time, but the season is as yet too inclement for him to travel with safety, Dr. Antonio says, and we shall be somewhat hurried also. My journey brooks no delay, but I desire to be home again in three months' time, if it be possible. We shall return overland likely enough, if the season be favourable. Edgar has not the strength or endurance that thou and I can boast. He will be happy at home with his books and the children; and when thou dost return, it may be that the thunder-clouds will have

rolled away, and that peace will be restored. So now, boy, if thou hast aught to do, do it quickly ere thou dost have to go; and early on the morrow Edgar and the children shall come and bid thee farewell here, for we have decided that for the present thou and they are best apart."

It was from little Geraldine that Edmund really learned one cause for his banishment from the Hall.

"Thou art my dear, dear brother; thou art not a miller's son, and if thou art, I care not!" she cried, with her arms about his neck; and when she and Otto had at last been persuaded to return home with the servants, Edgar and Edmund, their arms entwined, paced beside the mill-pool in the sheltered walk they had loved from childhood, and talked long and earnestly together.

"Oh, I am ready to go! Wert thou going with us, I would ask nothing better than to see the world," he cried; "but I like not leaving thee alone with that strange old man, and yon haughty princess mother, and Hugo, who is little better than a fiend. But promise me one thing, Edgar: that if thou art in any trouble or perplexity, thou wilt go straight to the town, to our—to my kinsmen there, and claim help. Thou dost know how readily it will be given; and for the rest, three months will slip quickly away, and I shall be back again."

"I will promise willingly," answered Edgar; "but thy fears are groundless, brother mine. Dr. Antonio is my very good friend; and the princess, though haughty to thee, is kind to me; and the children love me only second to thee. Hugo troubles not his head with my affairs. He

leaves me alone, and I leave him. I will see that Wild Will comes to no more harm at his hands ; and I will care for the dogs, who will miss thee sorely, as shall I. We must console each other, and the time will quickly pass ; but we must obey our father in this thing, Edmund. We owe him that, and in sooth I think perhaps he is right. It is thou, not I, who art something in peril, methinks, at Hascombe Hall. I am almost glad that thou art going thence for a time."

CHAPTER XVIII.

EDMUND'S RETURN.

IT had been cold and snowy February weather when Edmund rode away from Hascombe in the train of the earl. It was sunny May-tide when he returned, the blossom lying like white snow upon the great hawthorn trees along the roadside, the meadows smiling in all their bravery of waving grass and enamelling of flowers. All nature seemed to be giving its welcome to the travellers as they rode along, and in Edmund's heart there was the eager joy of expectancy, for he was counting each moment till he should hold Edgar in his arms once more ; and as they neared the familiar country, his eyes scanned the stretches of white road with feverish eagerness. Every moment he seemed to see a mounted wayfarer hastening to meet them, and each turn that became revealed to his gaze was swept by his keen and hawk-like glance.

But Edgar came not forth to meet them, and Edmund pressed up to Lord Hascombe's side with the air of one used to take a familiar place.

"Good my lord, did there not go forth a courier two days ago to give warning of our approach this day ?"

"Yes, truly, Edmund; I sent him from London, since it was needful for us to go thither first. We shall find them all agog to receive us when we arrive."

"But I marvel that Edgar comes not forth to meet us," said Edmund restlessly; "I had half thought to find him in London. I cannot guess what detains him now. He must be as eager to see me—and you, my lord—as I can be to see him; and I would not have tarried within walls were he coming back to me."

Lord Hascombe smiled slightly; he was a little surprised himself at Edgar's backwardness. He did not suppose the boy would be as eager to see him again as he would be to welcome back his foster-brother; but he was not lacking in affection to his father, and in the letter from him which had reached them in Italy he had spoken of counting the days and hours till their return. It seemed strange upon this bright May evening that he should not be upon the road to meet them, since they were now within three miles of Hascombe Hall.

Their three months' absence had wrought a change upon Edmund's outer man. He looked distinctly less the lad and more the youth than he had done hitherto. The kisses of the salt sea wind and the fervid Italian sunshine had tanned his cheeks with a ruddy brown glow. His experiences of foreign travel, and association with men rather than with boys, had given to his speech and manner an increase of manliness and maturity. He was close upon seventeen now, and he was dressed in the livery worn by Lord Hascombe's retainers and men-at-arms. His position

as one of the esquires was now defined with precision. The earl had come greatly to like the boy since they had been so much thrown together. He would fain have given him the old position of kinsman and almost of son in his household; but he was withheld by motives of prudence, remembering the friction of former days.

He had discussed the matter freely with Edmund, and the boy's perfect reasonableness and absence of all false pride had still further endeared him to the earl. Edmund recognized fully and freely that he must not be a bone of contention at the Hall, and that his own temper had been in part to blame for what had occurred before. Edgar would love him the same whatever his place was, he argued; and that being so, he cared for nothing else. When the time should come for Edgar to go forth and see the world, he would ride at his side and guard and protect him. This glimpse he had obtained of foreign life and travel would stand him in good stead. He had lost all fear of journeying either by land or by water. At first it had seemed to him marvellous that men could ever find their way across the trackless ocean, and through wild lands where man and beast seemed alike scarce to be seen. But he had gone and returned, and no hurt had befallen him. After such experience he would go with Edgar to the world's end, and fear nothing.

"See! see!" he cried in sudden excitement. "There are men upon the road in front—horsemen riding forth to meet us! It is Edgar coming at last!" And setting spurs to his horse, Edmund galloped off at full speed

towards the little cloud of dust that was approaching from the direction of Hascombe Hall.

Five minutes later Edmund had reined up, flushed and breathless, only to find himself face to face with Hugo and some half-score servants, nearly all of them Italians from the household of the princess. Hugo gave him a haughty stare and scowl of malevolence, and rode past him without so much as a word.

. There was one English servant in his following, and upon him Edmund eagerly pounced.

“Where is my brother?” he cried; and then correcting himself, he added more quietly, “I mean, where is the young lord? Where is Lord Edgar?”

In those days the sons of the nobles were generally distinguished by the prefix of “Lord” before the Christian name; and Lord Hascombe was an earl, although he was far from being one of the great nobles of the land. Indeed, just at this time there were very few of the great nobles left, and the old titles were many of them simply new creations bestowed upon new men, the old lines having become extinct through death or attainder.

The servant looked a little uncomfortable, but beneath Edmund's compelling glance he had to answer,—

“Lord Edgar is not at home. He has gone away upon a visit.”

Edmund's eyes dilated, and his brows contracted.

“Gone away upon a visit! And just as his father, our good lord, is expected! How comes that? And where is he gone?”

"He had left before the courier came announcing our lord's speedy return," answered the man; "and he is not far away. He is with the prior of Gadhelm."

"Now, by the Lord Harry, but this is passing strange!" cried Edmund hotly. "As near as the priory at Gadhelm, and yet not to come forth to meet his father and me on our return! What does it mean, sirrah? What does it mean?"

"Nay, I know not, sir," answered the servant respectfully, for Edmund had always been regarded in the household as a young kinsman of their lord's; and although this was now known not to be the case, yet the old feeling of respect survived, and Edmund's air and bearing all helped to inspire that sentiment. He was certainly a very knightly-looking youth, and Lord Hascombe had been half flattered, half vexed, by finding how it was taken everywhere as a matter of course that Edmund was his son. Indeed, some of his old friends in Italy had declared at the outset that they saw a strong resemblance, if not in feature, yet in bearing and manner. They knew by this time that there was a son in England, and Lord Hascombe concluded that they thought to do him a pleasure in praising one whom they took to be that son. He scarcely knew whether he was vexed or pleased by the talk he heard, and Edmund had been granted the place of kinsman almost *volens volens* during the whole journey. He looked every inch an earl's son, the man thought, as he gazed at the kindling face, the eagle eye, and heard the quietly imperious note in the young man's voice. The words he had not meant at the outset to speak seemed to be drawn from

him half against his will. "They do say that the lady—the princess—made shift to get him away; but I know not how that may be. He has been gone these five days, and we have heard naught of his return."

Edmund made no response, but turned back and galloped up to Lord Hascombe and his train.

"My lord," he said in his quick, decisive way, "I humbly crave leave to quit here this company and get me to Gadhelm. I have heard that Edgar is there, in the priory; and, as thou dost know, I am craving mightily to see him again. I humbly pray thee give me leave to go."

"Edgar at Gadhelm Priory!" echoed Lord Hascombe. "Now, how comes that at such a season?"

Hugo laughed a sudden, malicious laugh, flashed a bold, scornful look at Edmund, and answered carelessly,—

"Is not the month of May the month of our blessed Lady? And why should not our pious Edgar keep a retreat to her honour and glory, if he has a mind?"

Lord Hascombe drew his brows a little together as he answered,—

"Right enough, right enough, so far as it goes; but Edgar could have waited, methinks, till he had seen his father again, after an absence of three months."

"Edgar thinks naught but of his breviary and his book, and the words of the holy father confessor!" answered Hugo, still in the same mocking and sneering fashion. "Thou hast a mighty holy son for thy firstborn, good father; he will do all the fasting and praying for himself and the rest of us besides!"

Edmund's blood boiled within him, and yet he knew not why.

"My lord, may I go?" he asked.

Permission having been given, Edmund wasted no further words, but set spurs to his horse once more, and taking the short bridle-path through the woods towards Gadhelm, had soon left Hascombe on his left, and was riding at a hand-gallop towards the nearest city gate.

As he clattered into the now well-paved market-place, many citizens and 'prentice boys ran out to see who came, and a shout went up from half a score of throats,—

"It is Edmund, our good Edmund! He has returned from his travels, and has come to see us here!"

They crowded round him; they asked him a thousand questions; they showered invitations upon him; they praised his looks, his horse, his arms and accoutrements. But Edmund had only one purpose in his heart, and when he could get his word in he had but one question to address to all,—

"Where is Edgar? Where is my brother? It is of him that I am in search."

"Young Lord Edgar? Why, where should he be but at home?" asked several in return; and young Cuthbert added, pressing forward to get near his cousin,—

"I saw him out in the woods with the little golden-haired lady some seven days since, and he has ridden in to early mass in our church most Sundays since the weather has been fine."

"They tell me he is at the priory, on a visit to the

prior," said Edmund, drawing his brows together. "Do any of ye know aught of that?"

His eyes sought those of his cousin Peter, who always knew most about what went on within the walls of the priory; but Peter only shook his head.

"I have heard naught of it," he answered.

Edmund sprang from his horse and gave the reins to one of his many kinsmen and acquaintances.

"Take care of him for a little, I prithee. I would inquire more of this. Spare me my good cousin Peter for a while, and anon I will return and answer all that ye would ask."

They did not hinder him; they sympathized with his desire to see and find his brother. Edmund took Peter by the arm, and walked him through the town towards the priory.

"I like it not," he said. "Why should Edgar go to keep a retreat just as his father and I are getting home? I believe it not. There is something else afoot, and beshrew me if I find it not out, and cram the lie down Hugo's false throat! What hast thou seen of Edgar these past months? Came he oft to the town? Has he been well? Has he been happy?"

"He has looked something too much like a plant from which the sun's rays are screened. We said that he pined after thee; and he denied not that life was something different, something drearier, when thou wert not at his side. Nevertheless, he and the little lady and the tiny boy have oftentimes ridden into the town; and he has led

them into the workshops, and told them stories of how he and thou didst dwell amongst us once on a time. He had kind words and smiles for us all, and declared that he was well, albeit something too white in the face to please me. For the rest, they did say that he lived amongst the books and parchments of the library, or in the tower with the strange old man with the white beard, whom all men here term wizard. He told me once that he was no wizard, but a great and learned doctor, who gave his whole life to study and deep lore that other men know naught of. I know not how that may be; I only begged of Edgar not to let himself be bewitched, for that some men whispered strange things anent Dr. Antonio, and would even go a mile out of their path sooner than meet him after sundown."

They reached the priory gate in due course, and Peter put in his head at the lodge where his friend the lay-brother kept his watch by day.

"We have come for news of Lord Edgar Hascombe," he said. "Here is his foster-brother back from foreign parts, in a mighty hurry to see him."

"But why comes he here?" asked the lay-brother, coming forward, and regarding Edmund with suspicious and unfriendly eyes.

Edmund, too eager over his own story to heed aught else, was quick to explain why he had come. He slipped a gold piece into the man's hand, and bade him only take him to his brother, and he would get another like it from him.

The man's manner changed at this, and he let them through the gate, but bade them wait till he had made inquiries, for he knew naught of the matter.

"That may be true or it may be false," said Peter coolly, almost before the fellow was out of hearing. "They say what the prior bids them, and care nothing for aught besides."

The man was absent a short while, and then came back with an inscrutable face.

"It is true that the young lord is here," he answered, "but he is keeping a strict fast and retreat in honour of our blessed Lady. He cannot see any one till it be over—not even his brother. My lord prior also bade me say that Edmund Beetel was not to set foot within the precincts of the priory; if he comes again, he will be dealt with as a breaker of the laws. Thou hadst better get thee gone as fast as possible, young sir. I do but give the message I was charged with; do not visit thy wrath upon me, who am but a servant."

Edmund was too just to do that, nevertheless he remained long within the walls, desiring speech of the sub-prior, who came at last in response to his urgent summons, but only to repeat the same news in the same way. Edgar wished to see no one, not even his foster-brother, till the days of his retreat were ended. And it was vain for the monk to point out to Edmund the sanctity of such a resolution, or to convince him how much good would accrue to them both from this act of self-mortification.

Edmund came away raging at last, his head in a whirl;

a sort of fierce revolt was in his heart, not unmingled with vague fears.

"I like it not! I like it not!" he kept repeating. "Edgar cannot have changed so greatly in three months. He is being cozened and cajoled; Heaven send he is not being held in durance vile! There is somewhat that I like not in this. He was always devout; but this is not piety—it is mere superstition. Ah, Peter, if thou hadst seen all that I have of monks and priests and ecclesiastics these last months, thou wouldst not wonder that I have no faith in them, their truth, or their piety. They will sell themselves for gold and for soft living and feeding—not all, perhaps, but numbers and numbers. And the unholy lives that are led within cloistered walls! My soul sickens at it!"

Peter gave his cousin a shrewd glance as he made reply,—

"Thou needest not have gone to Italy to have found that out, good coz; we have plenty of cloistered sin here in Gadhelm. I sometimes wonder if Prince Henry will ever think on some of the tales I told him as we lay in the woods that night. He was mightily pleased to hear them, and laughed aloud again and again. He kept saying betwixt his teeth, 'Let me be but king one day!' Yet when men put the crown of the kingdom upon their heads they oftentimes forget much that they had held before."

It was impossible for Edmund to get to Hascombe Hall that night. His townsmen took absolute possession of

him. He was feasted in his grandfather's house, whither an assemblage of kinsfolk had been gathered. John and Mary Beetel had hurried from the mill, and were there to meet and greet him on his return; and despite his disappointment and restless anxiety about Edgar, he could not refuse to sit down with them all and tell the tale of his adventures.

So proud were they of him and his doings, such credit did they think he did them, so much goodwill was expressed towards him, that insensibly his mood changed, and he became happier and less disturbed; albeit when alone at night in his old room at the mill, he found himself unable to sleep, turning restlessly to and fro, possessed by the idea that Edgar wanted him, that Edgar was calling to him, that Edgar was in some peril from which he needed to be promptly rescued.

So strong was this impression that with the first glint of day in the sky Edmund rose and dressed, and before the dawn fairly broke he was prowling round the priory precincts, striving to gain admission somewhere, or by singing some familiar boyish songs of theirs beneath the walls to evoke a response from Edgar.

But all that happened was that the lay-brother to whom he had given money the day before came hastily out and warned him away. It was perfectly useless striving to get to his brother without the prior's sanction—the thing could not be done; and that sanction would never be obtained, save through the personal influence of Lord Hascombe or the princess.

Filled with a new idea, Edmund hastened up towards the Hall. The early light of an exquisite May morning was gleaming through the young green of the beeches, as he went with light springy steps up the beech glade. If only Edgar had been beside him, how his heart would have rejoiced! As it was, he was filled with strange apprehensions. His nerves were all on edge, and he gave a start, and scarcely restrained a cry, as a little white figure seemed to spring into the glade out of the shadow of the thicket, and came dancing towards him.

"Edmund! Edmund! Edmund!" cried a child's high-pitched voice, and the next minute little Geraldine had flung herself into his arms, and was pouring out words of love, welcome, and reproach, all in the same breathless way.

Edmund let her have her scold out, and then defended himself laughingly, yet with an undertone of gravity. He wanted Edgar. He had gone to seek him at the priory, but they would not let him in. He was coming now to find Lord Hascombe, and beg him to obtain the interview for him.

Geraldine's face suddenly changed; a scared look came into her eyes. She clung very close to Edmund, and whispered,—

"I do not believe Edgar is with the lord prior at all. Our mother says so, but I do not believe it."

Edmund started, and his heart beat fast.

"Where is he, then?"

"I believe he is at home—in the tower somewhere. I

believe Dr. Antonio has him, and that he will make him die slowly."

"Geraldine, Geraldine! what canst thou mean?"

"He is a wicked man," answered little Geraldine, pressing close to Edmund's side. "Other people have died—in Italy, I mean. I have heard the servants talk when they thought I was sleeping. Once I said something to Edgar, and he called me a wicked little girl to have such thoughts. But the thoughts come. I can't help them. I believe Dr. Antonio is a wizard, and that he will make Edgar dwindle and dwindle away till he dies. I believe they wanted to do it whilst you were away. He did get thin and white. But you came home sooner than they thought you would. And then Edgar went away. They said so; but I think he is there still. O Edmund, you will get him out! You will not let them kill him!"

Edmund's heart was thumping like a sledge-hammer; he felt the blood racing through his veins like molten fire. But the more Geraldine was questioned, the more vague and visionary her answers became. She knew nothing—absolutely nothing; but her head was full of imaginary fears, and these fears Edmund instantly shared, though without a particle of reason to fortify them.

It was a difficult matter to know what step to take; but he and Geraldine, under pretext of a game of hide-and-seek, scoured the great house from end to end, from the topmost attic to the lowest cellar, invading Dr. Antonio's rooms—Edmund professed to come to him for news of Edgar—and even asking to visit the laboratory and the observatory.

He showed them everything, bland and smiling, and spoke of his own impatience to get his pupil back. Dr. Antonio never professed much zeal for religion, and smiled and shrugged his shoulders at the mention of Edgar's absence from home.

"It will not last; he will grow tired of it. We cannot live on pious meditation and bread and water. Have a little patience, and he will return, and will have had enough of our blessed Lady to last him many a year."

Something in the sneer repelled Edmund, though he had been tempted sometimes to sneer himself. He was restless and miserable; and Hugo, when he met him in the corridors, passed him by with a look of malice and triumph. Lady Hascombe he did not see; and at meals he sat at the second table, and was no longer treated as a kinsman, though nothing would keep the younger children from his side.

He could get no speech of Lord Hascombe till the morrow; and then, touched by his wan looks, the earl rode down to the priory with Edmund to see his son, and get speech of him for his foster-brother. But, rather to his annoyance, the prior was firm in his refusal to permit either of them to disturb Edgar. Until the youth himself wished it, no one could be admitted. He had made a vow, said the prior, rather with a view to the safe return of father and brother, and was now engaged in keeping it. They must be patient and wait till the expiration of the time; he could say nothing more.

Lord Hascombe had sufficient respect for the methods of

the church system to submit with a fairly good grace, although he could not but think that the prior was avenging himself somewhat upon him for his firmness in abiding by the decision of the Prince of Wales upon the water question at the mills, and not permitting, on his return, the opening of the matter afresh. In matters spiritual, however, he was ready to give the prior his way, and rejoined Edmund outside, saying that it would be useless to press the matter; that all they could now do would be to wait in patience till Edgar's vows were fulfilled, and he came back of his own free-will.

Then Edmund broke out passionately; out came the suspicions and convictions that had been growing upon him during the past day and night—the things that Geraldine had said, his own certainty that all was not well with Edgar, and his fears of Dr. Antonio. All this was outpoured upon the astonished earl, who looked back at Edmund as though he thought him bereft of his senses.

And in truth Edmund soon saw that he might as well have saved himself the trouble of speaking. His words were as mere ravings to Edgar's father. Had not his wife told him that Edgar was at the priory? Had not the prior admitted as much himself? Was he not to return thence in a few days, or at most a week from now? As for Geraldine, said Lord Hascombe a little sternly, Edmund ought to know better than to attach any weight to the idle words of an imaginative child, who would gravely believe that Dr. Antonio rode through the world on a bat's back or a broomstick, who was filled with the

wildest notions picked up from ignorant Italian peasants and servants, and who would make up a thousand foolish stories without either rhyme or reason.

Edmund was silenced. He had heard plenty of little Geraldine's fanciful talk before this, and could not deny what Lord Hascombe said; yet he was not one whit convinced that there was not foul play somewhere. He spoke not a word in response to the rather severe rebuke he received, but sat in deep silence.

Lord Hascombe looked at him once or twice, and having delivered himself of his speech, was ready to be kind again.

"Think not that I am not sorry for thy disappointment, and something vexed myself at Edgar's resolve; but be patient, and the time will soon pass. If there be anything else thou dost desire of me—"

Edmund suddenly lifted his head and said,—

"Prithee, my lord, give me leave to roam abroad awhile, to pass the time of Edgar's retreat. I feel as though the air of the Hall would stifle me. Let me be mine own master for the nonce, to come and go at will. I crave none other boon."

"And that one I grant readily," answered Lord Hascombe, secretly rejoicing that Edmund wished to leave the Hall for the time being. If he held this foolish theory about Edgar, he might let some undesirable words escape his lips that would make an open rupture between him and the princess, or he might mortally offend Dr. Antonio, who was not to be offended with impunity.

If Edmund took himself off during the days of Edgar's penance, or retreat, or vow, whatever it was, and returned to find him in his old place, all might go smoothly. He looked kindly at the grave-faced lad beside him, and then said again,—

“That boon I grant willingly. Call thyself thine own master until Edgar has returned to need thy services.”

Edmund thanked the earl, and almost at once bade him farewell, and turning his horse into another path, took the way to the town instead of to the Hall.

He halted by the shop of the master-saddler, where Peter now worked as skilled craftsman, and beckoned him out.

“Couldst get a holiday, an thou didst ask it?” he inquired, searching his face with grave, inquiring eyes.

“I trow so,” answered the young man, looking with keen curiosity into Edmund's face. “My father has talked this long while of sparing me to go to London, to make some inquiries there anent the new leather-work by the outlandish men settled there. Belike he could spare me for somewhat else—”

“Ay, and kill two birds with one stone, as saith the proverb; for I journey to London myself, and would have thee for my companion on the road.”

Peter's eyes sparkled; he could scarcely restrain a cry of delight and astonishment.

“Now, marry, that is good hearing! To travel to London with thee! I trow my father will be right pleased to spare me. Yet thou hast but just returned

thence, good coz. Why goest thou back thither so soon? Is it upon thy lord's business?"

"Nay, it is upon mine own."

"Thine own? And what may that be? Prithee, tell me, cousin."

Edmund bent low over his saddle-bow and said,—

"Hist! a word in thine ear; but tell it again to none. My business is to find the young prince, and to beg of him to come to our aid."

CHAPTER XIX.

FINDING A FRIEND.

PETER'S wonder at the strange sights and sounds of gay London town was a thing to be remembered. Edmund for the moment almost forgot his own troubles and anxieties in the entertainment he received from his companion. They had no trouble as to lodging themselves, for, since Edmund wore the Hascombe livery, and was well known at the earl's house hard by the great river, he and his companion found a ready welcome there, and free quarters for as long as they liked to remain.

The prince, they heard, was not at the Tower, but was at Greenwich, and there Edmund resolved to seek him speedily. But he gave Peter one day in which to see the sights of London, and to go and visit the "outlandish" or foreign leather-workers, of whom the chief was one Mottas; and he even visited their yard himself, and made friends with the master by talking broken French to him, that he had picked up in his travels, and was shown in consequence a few of the secrets of the trade that Peter would scarcely have learned alone.

But Peter had his own way of getting on with people,

and his quick appreciation of what he saw won the esteem and goodwill of Mottas, who invited them both to come again. Peter promised to do so early on the morrow, whilst Edmund made the arrangements for getting to Greenwich that afternoon. He would fain have lingered longer in this wonderful city himself, but he sympathized with Edmund's feverish haste to go to his brother's aid. If, indeed, any part of little Geraldine's tale were correct, the sooner they solicited the help of the prince on Edgar's behalf the better for all.

As they were walking homewards through the sunny streets, gazing at the throng of foot-passengers and riders that jostled one another in the narrow thoroughfares, Edmund gave a great start, and uttered a quick exclamation of surprise.

"What hast thou seen?" asked Peter, following the direction of his eager glance.

Edmund did not reply, but plunged across the street, under the noses of the horsemen; and Peter followed, wondering. Edmund then walked steadily for a few minutes behind the tall figure of a thin, bronzed man who was sauntering along the street with something of the swinging gait of a soldier, though the style of his dress betokened him a man of rank. From time to time he turned his head, and Peter saw the profile of a face which seemed to him in some sort familiar, although he could not recollect where he had seen it. These glimpses, however, seemed to satisfy Edmund, who suddenly broke the silence with some mysterious words,—

“Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills!”

The tall stranger wheeled suddenly round and faced the boys full. Edmund lifted his head and looked him full in the eyes. The next moment two strong hands were laid upon his shoulders, and a glad, cordial voice cried out,—

“By the bones of all the holy saints, ’tis my nephew Edgar!”

“Good my lord, it is not thy nephew Edgar, but his foster-brother Edmund Beetel,” answered the boy; “yet sure the holy saints must have sent you hither at a happy hour, for thy nephew is in sore need of the strong arm of a kinsman, and therefore am I come to London in search of such help as I can find.”

The eyes of Lord James were searching the boy’s face. His brow was puckered into a frown of perplexity.

“Faith! but if thou be not my nephew, whence hast thou gotten the Kildare face?” quoth he; and turning his gaze full upon Peter, he asked, “Tell me now, my good youth—look at the pair of us—might we not well pass in any company for father and son?”

Peter stared from one face to the other, his shrewd eyes beginning to gleam and glitter. It was even as Lord James had said: feature for feature the faces bore close resemblance, though the one was young and smooth, and the other weather-beaten, bronzed, and lined by the hand of time. Men lived somewhat hard in those days, and though Lord James was barely forty, he had the battered look which a man soon gets who lives sword in hand, and is ever in the forefront of such fighting as can be found in



"By the bones of all the holy saints, 'tis my nephew Edgar!"

the world. A soldier of fortune he had been all his life, and was likely to be to the end of the chapter.

"In truth, my lord, but I see the likeness plain," answered Peter, "and I have heard my good aunt, Mary Beetel, speak of it—at least, she has oftentimes remarked how that Edmund here had caught so many tricks of speech and manner from Lord James Fitzgerald; but sure it is something strange that as he grows to man's estate he should copy or catch his features too. Beshrew me if it be not the strangest matter I have ever known!"

But for the moment Edmund was in too great haste to tell his tale to heed overmuch this talk as to likeness betwixt himself and Lord James. Already he was pouring out his story into the willing ears of Edgar's kinsman; and so soon as Lord James realized that his nephew appeared to be in some peril, through the machinations of the foreign princess, whom he had seen and had not loved long years before, he listened with the keenest attention, drawing the boys along with him till he reached his lodgings in Holborn—Hole Bourne, as it was then called—where he bade them follow him up to his pleasant low-ceiled chamber overhanging the street, where the sunlight still glanced in through the latticed windows, and lighted up the long, bare room that was adorned with arms and accoutrements such as formed Lord James's chief worldly possessions.

A man-servant with a strong Hibernian brogue was laying the table for supper, and three places were set instead of one, as it was plain that the master had no intention of sparing his guests for the present.

Whilst Edmund talked on and on, pouring out his story in fresh detail, as he observed the keen interest taken in it by his listener, Lord James was unable to take his eyes from the lad's face, and once he beckoned to his servant, and asked in a low tone,—

“Of whom does yonder lad put thee in mind, Larry?”

“Sure and he is the very moral of my young Lord Kildare,” answered the man without a moment's pause, “and I was making so bold as to wish to ask yer honour what the name of the young gentleman might be, for I thought I knew every Kildare that draws breath, but here is one that I've never set my blessed eyes on till to-day.”

Thus fortified in his own convictions, Lord James bade his guests to table; and after they had eaten and drunk he dismissed the servant, and the trio drew towards the window once again, the soft twilight filling the air, and gradually dimming the brightness that lingered long in the west.

Edmund had told his tale again and yet again. Lord James was in full possession of all the facts and of all the fears entertained by the foster-brother—fears in which he himself bore a share. Yet the peril in which Edgar might stand was not the first thought in his mind; and after another long scrutiny of Edmund's face, he suddenly broke out,—

“Boy, it is idle for thee to call thyself Edmund Beetel. Thou art mine own sister's son. Thou art Kildare, every inch of thee. Thou art Edgar Hascombe thyself, say what thou wilt to the contrary.”

"Impossible!" cried the lad. "Edgar is shut up in durance vile yonder in—"

"Oh, peace, peace, my lad! I know that well enow. But still I say that thou art Edgar Hascombe, and that belike it is Edmund Beetel whom they have got yonder, thinking they have the young heir of Hascombe Hall in their hands."

Edmund sprang to his feet, bewildered beyond measure. It seemed to him as though the world had suddenly turned topsy-turvy with him. What did it mean, this persistent claiming of him as a kinsman—of him, the miller's son? And yet did he not see in that bronzed face opposite a strange likeness to his own? Did he not feel that same thrill of kinship that had fired his blood even in his boyhood, when Lord James had been the idol of his youthful dreams? But how could it be? how could it be? Edgar was at home, in the clutches of the stepmother. He was Edgar Hascombe. How could there be two of them?

"Thou art as like my brother's young son as though thou wert his twin," pursued Lord James, "save that he is something older. Larry knew thee for a Kildare when first he set eyes on thee. It is idle to fight against such facts. If thou art Edmund Beetel of Hascombe Mill, how comest thou by the face and gestures and voice of the Fitzgeralds?"

Then Peter suddenly sprang up and burst into excited speech.

"I know!" he cried; "I see it all now! Many a time have I marvelled what it could have meant, but now I

understand well. Listen, Lord James. Edmund there—for we must still call him so, else we shall be too greatly confused—will tell your lordship how that I have ever been credited from childhood with long ears for hearing secrets that were not meant to reach them.”

Edmund bent his head in assent. His breath was coming thick and fast; a shiver seemed passing through his frame. What was he about to hear?

“Then, my good lord, listen further. There have been times when I have been on a visit to my grandsire and grandam who live hard by our house, and who have ever had something of a favour for me—there have been many times, I say, when they have thought me to be sound asleep in my cupboard bed when I have been broad awake, listening with eager ears to the talk betwixt them twain as they went to rest or lay abed. Many and many a thing have I so heard that else I should never have known; and now I verily believe I can tell you what this puzzle means, albeit I never understood before.”

“Then tell us straightly,” said Lord James. “Dost think that the Beetels changed the boys, that their son might be brought up as the heir of an earl?”

Edmund started in indignation at such a suggestion, but Peter smiled knowingly as he replied,—

“Nay, I know well that it was not done wittingly, but methinks there was some real confusion and doubt after the infants had been taken from my good aunt of the mill at the time of the sickness.”

And then Peter proceeded in roundabout fashion, but

with no lack of graphic detail, to retail fragments of conversations he had heard at different times—speculations as to the traits developing in the different boys' characters, comparisons between them, talk about the gentle Lady Geraldine and her lute-playing, and Edgar's proficiency on that instrument, his gentle ways and the eager love of books that he showed; whilst Edmund's skill with craftsmen's tools, and his hardiness and hardihood, were discussed and said to show his kinship with the Beetel family. Without the key to the mystery, Peter had puzzled in vain to know why these things were said; and even when he heard that Lord Hascombe had come and claimed Edgar for a son, everything was not explained away, for there had been expressions of doubt and trouble. The old man and his wife had discussed whether Lord Hascombe should be told of the difficulty, and he had often heard them say that it was well nothing had been said to trouble him. He saw the likeness to the mother, and in seeing that was satisfied. The Beetels themselves were satisfied that all was well; but Peter was certain now, and his listeners with him, that at one time of their infant life the boys had been indistinguishable, and that it had been guesswork that had given them their respective names.

“And the guess has been wrong!” cried Lord James in some excitement, “the only puzzle being how Edgar—as we have always called him—hath gotten his gentle ways, his lute-playing, and his scholarship, since that hath not been in the family of the Beetels, I trow, nor much in

that of Kildare, albeit my sister had a pretty gift for music."

"That is easily told," answered the ever-ready Peter, "for I have often heard the story of the poor gentleman who died at mine uncle's inn, leaving behind his daughter Mary, who married my Uncle John. Although he was so poor at the last, he came of a race that had once had noble blood in their veins; and, but for untoward fortune, Mary the miller's wife might have been a lady. She had some little scholarship herself, and skill in music too; and her father had been a learned man, and others of his race before him. If Edmund be all Kildare, then Mary's son is all Vernon. Do not the old wives say that every firstborn son takes after his mother rather than his father?"

Edmund had his hand pressed over his eyes. The blood was beating in his temples. His head felt as though it were spinning round, so great was his perplexity and bewilderment. He to find himself no longer Edmund, but Edgar! He the heir to the earldom and to Hascombe Hall! He the son of Lord Hascombe, the nephew of Lord James! He the elder brother of the boy who had scorned and flouted him, and thought it shame to sit at the same table with a "base-born churl"!

Lord James had his arm across the boy's shoulders, and was looking into his face with smiling eyes.

"Wilt have me for thine uncle now, good lad?" he asked; and with something almost like a sob Edmund threw himself into the arms of the kindly and impulsive Irish uncle.

“Nay, now, but this is good, this is excellent well!” cried Lord James. “My lady has gotten the miller’s son, and thinks to clear her son’s path in life by making away with him. It may be, boy, that she and the prior, and that Dr. Antonio of whom thou dost speak, are amongst them about to seek to work so much upon the devotion and piety of Edgar—since we must needs call him so till thine own claim to the name hath been established—as to persuade him into taking monastic vows, and so cutting himself off from the benefits that would else come to him as his father’s heir. Men have been cozened in this way many a time ere now, and a youth who loves his books may well be brought to think that a life of cloistered repose is the life for him. And if this be so, and if the church hath gotten him into her greedy maw—I speak not of Holy Church herself, but of those lazy monks and friars who are as greedy of gold as they are of good living, making bargain with the princess for a division of the spoil betwixt them and Hugo one day—why, then, I say we may have trouble in getting him out of their clutches; and this the more so that Lord Hascombe is much ruled by wife and priest both, and may refuse even the claim of a near kinsman such as myself, when it is his own son who is the victim of the plot in which he will not believe, arguing that the father has the nearer claim, and if he be satisfied none else need interfere.”

“What, then, shall we do?” broke in Edmund with feverish impatience. “It matters not whether it be he or I that shall prove to be Lord Hascombe’s son. I must get

Edgar out of the clutches of those who would sunder us, and for the rest I care not. Let him have all; so long as I have him, I ask nothing more."

Lord James smiled as he made answer,—

"Why, we will do together what thou wast about to do alone. We will to Greenwich on the morrow, and see if we can get sight and speech with the prince. He is well-nigh certain to be there, for upon every Monday and Thursday the knights who have volunteered for the service hold the lists against all comers, and they say that the prince is seldom absent from the mimic warfare; and if thou hast not forgotten the lessons I once taught thee, methinks thou shouldst be able to cast a spear or sword, or it may be carry off the ring, and win a smile from the prince that will bring thee easily to his side."

"Do they have joustings in the park yonder at Greenwich every week?" asked Edmund eagerly.

"Marry, yes, and wellnigh every day of the week; but Mondays and Thursdays are the great days, when the gentlemen answer to all comers, and the prince comes to watch the prowess of great and small. They say that the prince would fain revive once more the ancient practices and usages of chivalry, and that as in the months of May and June there cannot well be hunting in the forests, he has commanded all men who are of a like mind to repair as often as may be to the park at Greenwich, there to meet together in joustings and feats of arms, and show to him and to the world such knightly sports and usages as used to be in days of old."

“And he doth come to join and to watch?” asked Edmund with eager eyes.

“Ay, verily, so men say; and I did truly see him there when I went to try my skill, and he spoke very graciously to me, not knowing at the first who I was nor whence I had come. When he knew that later, he would have had me to the palace, but I excused myself. With the prince, and even with his father, I have now no quarrel; but there be some at the court—well, the Kildare blood will not be controlled, therefore I keep away. Yet for the king’s majesty I have respect and liking; he is a man who knows well how to rule his kingdom. Didst hear the answer he made in former troublous days—ere he made my brother lord deputy? It was said to him, and that right truly, ‘All Ireland cannot rule Kildare;’ to which he made prompt reply, ‘Then Kildare shall rule all Ireland.’ And so it is to this day; but if he had not won Kildare, he would never have been true king in Ireland.”

Upon the morrow, early in the day, Lord James and the boys took a large wherry manned by some stout watermen, and upon a strong ebb tide took their way down to Greenwich. This was a new experience to Peter, and Edmund had never been so far by river before. Lord James was a delightful cicerone, not only pointing out everything of interest as they passed, but adding anecdote and reminiscence without number; passing on from one to another—taking them far over the seas one moment, and bringing them home again the next; full of stories and incidents of past adventures, brimming over with the keen

Irish humour of his race, till the boys could scarcely believe how the miles and the minutes fled, and were at their journey's end before they could believe that the journey could so soon have been accomplished.

The great glades of Greenwich Park, with the stately trees and herds of deer, looked their very best as the trio made their way up from the river towards the open meadow-like space where the games and joustings were held.

Edmund's eyes scanned the distant crowd as they approached. He had the keen sight that so often comes to those who live out in the air, and study the habits of the wild creatures of the wood, and follow after the pleasures of the chase. It was a year since he had last seen the prince, yet he was certain he should know him amongst a thousand; but though his eyes roved over the gay assemblage again and again, he could see no figure that reminded him of their Hal of the woods. His eyes were insensibly drawn to the sports that were going on, and in particular to the white shield hanging from the tree, beneath which the knights of the jousts were stationed; and Lord James gave him a friendly blow upon the shoulder, saying,—

“Go write thy name upon yon shield, and take a turn when thy time comes, and let me see how thou canst handle spear and sword. An thou art true Kildare, thou shouldst disarm thy man, let him be never so bold and skilful.”

With a flush on his cheek, and a light in his eye,

Edmund did as he was bidden. Several names were inscribed before his own, and hardly had he set his down when a great clock or bell boomed out the hour of noon, and the servants began to clear the space for the mock battle to begin.

In other places sports were in full swing—quoits, various games of ball, wrestling matches, quarter-staff, quintain, and the like. But the best and smoothest piece of ground was kept for the tourney, as the prince loved to call it, though from the careful rules laid down, and from the nature of the weapons used, there was not much of the real tourney of old days in the sport, and it could be indulged in almost as safely as quarter-staff or play with the foils.

The combatants might use either spear or sword; but these were "bastard" weapons—that is, without point or edge; and even the number of blows dealt was carefully regulated. Nevertheless there was scope for considerable skill and address, as Edmund quickly observed in watching the champions and their adversaries; and Lord James, standing at his elbow, kept up a whispered commentary, telling him exactly how to avoid being disarmed by certain feints and thrusts, and how to return them so as if possible to disarm the adversary.

In the excitement of watching these contests, feeling that his own turn was drawing near, Edmund forgot all about the prince and his possible coming; and when his name was called aloud by the herald he stepped forward fearlessly and eagerly, thinking only of Lord James, and

having a desire to show him that his early lessons in the art of attack and defence had not been thrown away.

Edmund had spent much of his time abroad in fencing and sword-play, learning thereby the tricks of various nations. In spite of his being but seventeen years old, he was possessed of a tall, well-knit figure, which, though slight, was very wiry and strong. All his muscles were well developed, supple, and under a marvellous control. His eye was steady and true; he had the temperament of the true fighting man—the temperament that grows cooler and calmer at the moment of strife, though the nerves may have been quivering and tingling beforehand with eager impetuosity.

As he stepped forward into the ring and took the weapon handed him, there was something like a laugh and a cheer, for he was much younger and slighter than any of the previous comers. Edmund fancied that he saw a smile upon the face of the challenger, who had disposed without difficulty of his earlier adversaries, and he felt the blood mount in his cheek as he prepared himself for the combat, though he showed no other sign of emotion.

They met, and in the first onset Edmund had wellnigh disarmed his foe, for the knight was fighting but carelessly against this youth, and but for his exceeding quickness his sword would have been sent spinning into the air. A laugh went up from the spectators who were skilled enough to be aware of what had passed, but the laugh was this time with and not against Edmund, and the youth heard amid the merriment of the crowd a ringing,

boisterous laugh that sent the blood tingling through his veins. He knew the laugh amongst a thousand, and it nerved him as nothing else in the world could do. He knew the laugh, and he knew the voice that cried in lusty accents,—

“How now, Sir Knight Challenger; thou hast a lusty young bantam there! Have a care, good sir, to thine own swordsmanship, else yon David will bring down a second Goliath!”

Edmund's muscles seemed all to turn to steel as he heard those familiar, mocking tones. From that moment he felt such an assurance of victory that he closed fearlessly again, and though his adversary now showed no carelessness, but treated him to all the skill and address of which he was possessed, yet so cleverly were his thrusts parried, so quick and dexterous were the blows aimed at him, so true was eye, wrist, and arm of his opponent, that before the limit of the blows had been reached Edmund had sent his sword flying out of his hand, to fall upon the heads of the cheering crowd, leaving him triumphant victor of the field.

“By the beard of St. Anthony, that was deftly fought!” cried the voice which had done so much to win Edmund his triumph.—“Herald, what is the name of the young champion?”

“Edmund Beetel, may it please your majesty.”

“Beetel, Beetel, Edmund Beetel; surely I should know that name,” cried the prince; and then he turned to look at the youth, and broke into a sudden peal of mirth. “By

the mass, but this is none other than my worthy Edmund of Gadhelm.—Good comrade, well met! Right glad am I to see thee once again, and with such a spirit of thine own, to wit. Dost remember the miracle of the water, and the prior of Gadhelm? Ah, how many a time have I roared with laughter to recall that merry scene! Even my grave and reverend father laughed aloud as I told the tale in his hearing. How goes the worthy prior? Has he made further efforts to obtain his water? And how many of my bold band of boys have you here to-day? Methinks I see the face of long-eared Peter.—Good-morrow to thee, honest jackass, and may thine ears never be less!”

Peter's face glowed at being thus distinguished by the notice of the prince, and the onlookers regarded the unknown lads with some surprise; but Prince Hal was famed for his easy ways, and he would be hail-fellow-well-met with high or low when it suited his fancy. He now linked his arm within that of Edmund, and was about to lead him off to enjoy a talk with him over those boyish adventures, now a year old, when he saw Lord James approaching, and his face lighted up as he greeted him.

“Marry, well met, my lord. Right glad am I to see you once more. I hope to see your skill and prowess on the field again to-day. Has young Edmund Beetel transferred his allegiance to you? I mind how he was for ever telling of Lord James—the uncle of his foster-brother, was it not? Didst thou not tell me as much when last we met?”

“Ay, good my lord, and so I thought; but beshrew me

if I told not a lie! Sweet prince, may it please you to hear from us a strange tale, that we have come far to tell you. This boy—”

But Edmund, unable to wait for his turn, here flung himself upon his knees before the prince, crying in urgent accents,—

“Ah, sweet prince, hear me! I have not forgot how, when we were comrades in the wood for one night, thou didst say that if ever trouble came to us through the prior or from other cause, we might seek thee out, and that thou wouldst see justice done. Therefore have I come to thee now to plead thy promise. They have taken my brother from me. The prior has helped in the wicked scheme. They have him shut up. No man may go unto him. They say it is a vow, but I know Edgar. I had been absent three months from his side. I was athirst for his face and his voice, as he for mine; but they have gotten him fast. We cannot get to him, not even his own father; but him they cozen with false tales—me they cannot. I believe they will do him to death, that Hugo, his half-brother, may become the heir. O sweet prince, come but to our aid, and we will serve thee with all the power that subjects may, and love and bless thee to the last hour of our lives!”

CHAPTER XX.

THE WORD OF A PRINCE.

THREE days later, as the sun was beginning to set behind the western hills, a small cavalcade of riders might have been seen upon the road leading to Gadhelm and Hascombe, at the head of which rode a fine-looking man, bronzed and spare, with a bright-faced boy on either side of him, the younger of whom, by his port and his dress, was plainly a personage of no small importance, though he travelled with but a handful of followers in his wake. A lad from the town, who had been out in that direction, and caught sight of the party as he returned homeward, stood agape for a few moments, and then rushed helter-skelter towards the town, crying at the top of his voice through the streets thereof that Edmund Beutel was riding back, and with him the king's son.

This news was true; for young Henry, Prince of Wales, had so keenly interested himself in the story he had heard about the twins of Hascombe, as he had first known them, that nothing would serve but that he should go in person to Gadhelm to insist upon the restoration of Edgar from the hands of the prior, or whatever person had

him in durance vile, and to examine with his own acute judgment the moot point as to whether Edmund was in truth the son of the miller or the son of Lord Hascombe.

“Madcap Hal,” as his comrades called him, was keenly alive to anything that bordered upon the romantic. He was an ardent lover of the ancient lore of chivalry, and from his boyhood onward did all that he could to galvanize into new life those precepts and practices that had long fallen into desuetude. He desired to be thought the friend of his people; his ambition was to show that a prince could be every inch a prince and yet mingle freely with his humblest subjects, taking keen interest in their affairs, and denying himself to none.

It had touched him with a keen and quick sense of pleasure that young Edmund Beetel, believing himself none other than a miller’s son, had taken him at his word—a word spoken half in jest, it may be—and had travelled with confidence to lay his case before the king’s son and plead his help and countenance.

It had excited him to no small pitch of curiosity and interest to learn how Lord James Fitzgerald claimed the lad as his nephew, and to hear Peter’s tales, ingeniously pieced together, of the various words he had heard at different times, all seeming to point to the conclusion that at one time there had been a doubt as to which of the children was Lord Hascombe’s son.

“Will there be any person in the wide world that can settle the point for us?” asked the prince, who for the moment was almost more engrossed with this question than

with the fate of Edgar. "Was there nobody who saw the boys as babes, and could help us to a conclusion? It is not possible, as thou dost say, good Edmund, that Mary Beetal sought to put her own son in the place of the heir of the earldom. Some women would have been tempted, perchance; but from what I have observed of her, and from what thou dost say, I think not that she would be one to stoop to such a trick."

"Indeed no," answered Edmund firmly; "I would stake my life upon her innocence. Moreover, the very words that Peter has heard, if they mean aught, prove that there was no thought to deceive."

"True, true; and Edgar's gentleness and softness led them to believe in his gentle birth. They forgot that the gentle Lady Hascombe was sprung from the warlike stock of Kildare."

"Edmund is Kildare, every inch of him!" cried Lord James, bringing his hand down upon his horse's neck with an emphatic smack. "If Lord Hascombe had known more of his wife's kindred these past years, and had not shut himself away from them with his princess wife in Italy, he must have known which of the two lads was his wife's son—and his own. But how can we prove it? How can we bring it home?"

"Who are they that know aught of the matter—that knew of the doubt betwixt the boys when it first arose?" asked the prince.

They all looked at Peter for a reply to this question, and he mused awhile, and then said,—

“Methinks it was known to very few. The grand-parents were told, and perchance Martin the steward, though of that I am not certain. But we are hard by Martin’s cottage now; for he lives no longer at the Hall, since my lady rules there. May it please your highness to alight and follow this track to his house? It may be he could tell us more of this matter than anybody else.”

The prince was weary of the saddle, and sprang readily to the ground, and the others followed his example. The servants were bidden to take the horses to the town, and to order there a good repast for some travellers, without letting their degree be known; and having thus given his orders, the prince bade Peter lead the way, and followed with his arm linked in Edmund’s.

Martin was now lodged in a not uncomfortable or ill-built house or cottage, not far distant from the Hall. He had made the place home-like and pleasant, and though growing now somewhat infirm, was still able to keep a general oversight of the estate, and give his master good advice whenever he chose to consult him. He had no high opinion of Lady Hascombe and her son, and for that reason, perhaps, had been banished the house soon after her arrival there; but Lord Hascombe trusted him as he deserved to be trusted, and to him he was as loyal and devoted as ever.

It was with great astonishment that he perceived the approach of this band of visitors, and still deeper was his surprise when Peter, dashing forward in advance of the rest, poured into his ears the bewildering news that Prince

Henry himself had come to inquire into the mysterious disappearance of Edgar Hascombe, and that Lord James Fitzgerald was with him.

The old man hobbled out in great haste to receive such distinguished guests, and was assailed at once by an eager cry from Edmund,—

“Martin, good Martin, prithee tell me, has Edgar yet returned from the priory?”

“Now God be praised that thou hast returned, my boy,” cried Martin, “and in such company too!” and as he spoke he saluted Lord James, and bent his knee with humble reverence to the prince; “for verily do I fear that some evil is afoot against the poor lad. ’Tis given forth now that he has seen a vision of our blessed Lady; that she revealed herself to him during his retreat in her honour; and that she has so filled and possessed his soul with adoring love for her and for her Son that he has forgot all else beside, and wishes for nothing but to take the vows that shall make him a priest or monk all his days; and that not even to see father or brother will he consent to come forth from the cloister, lest through them the devil may seek to turn him away from his good purpose.”

“It is false!” cried Edmund, in a sudden passion of indignation and despair. “Good my lord, it is false and vile. Edgar never spoke such words as these. They are lies every one of them—lies of my lady or the prior, to cozen and deceive his father, who knows little of Edgar, and may easily be hoodwinked. He has no desire for the life of the cloister. I know him too well to listen to such tales.

They are working their evil will upon him to get him out of Hugo's path, and this is the fraud by which they hope to cloak their villany. O sweet prince, thank Heaven thou art here to defeat them !”

“In sooth, I am well pleased myself,” answered Henry, laughing. “This is as pretty an artifice as I have ever heard. And how will my lady look, good Martin, thinkest thou, when we come to tell her that she has gotten in her clutches the son of the miller of Hascombe, and that Lord Hascombe's heir is here with us ?” and as he spoke he laid his hand on Edmund's shoulder.

Martin started violently, and gazed first at the prince, then at Edmund, and last at Lord James, who broke into a laugh as he cried,—

“Said I not to thee from the first that that was the nephew for me ? Had he looked at ten years old as he looks at seventeen, I had settled the doubt then and there. Good Martin, tell us whence has come this confusion betwixt the boys ? The lad thou seest before thee is my sister's son, and I will take mine oath upon it. He is Kildare, every inch of him ; and were the young earl here this day, thou wouldst see it for thyself. The lads might pass as brothers anywhere. Why, even the likeness to me should go far to prove it.”

Martin, with an eager, bewildered air, ushered the guests into his cottage, where Dorcas had already spread the table with the best viands her well-stocked larder possessed. The prince gave a nod of satisfaction, and set himself to work at once upon the good cheer, whilst Martin

stood before them trembling with eagerness, telling in every detail the whole story of the doubt which at one time had arisen about the identity of the two boys, and how they had thought to lay the doubt to rest, and had been so secure of their ground that they had not even breathed to the father on his return the uncomfortable tidings that there ever had been this confusion.

“We thought it for the best not to trouble our good lord with misgivings, and we were so well used to the lads by the names we had given them that seldom did we remember how once we had been in doubt. But will my lord and his lady believe? The earl has oftentimes said that Lord Edgar has his mother’s eyes; and my lady, the princess, is ill to convince when she has her mind set the other way.”

The prince gave a short grim laugh.

“I will undertake the convincing of my lady,” he remarked beneath his breath, as he put a tankard of foaming ale to his lips; but Lord James, with bent brow, was looking at Martin.

“Is there any old wife in these parts who could perchance have seen the children when they were infants, and might have noted somewhat about either or both which could help us in the matter?” he asked. “True, if Mary Beetel was unable to distinguish betwixt them, it is scarce possible that another might; but yet there are eyes and eyes, and some see what others pass over. There is thy wife, Martin; but thou wilt know all she does. Was there none else who saw the infant heir of Hascombe ere he was transferred to the care of the miller’s wife?”

Martin looked at his wife, who, unable to tear herself from the room where such an exciting colloquy was being held, was standing in the doorway that led to the kitchen, drinking in every word.

"There was that old Margery, Wild Will's mother," she said, "whom Lady Hascombe defended and befriended, and suffered none to molest. She was ever prowling round the house then. I trow that she would certainly find her way to the room of our lady to take a look at the baby boy, and perchance give one of her draughts to the young mother; for though she hated the name of Hascombe, she was learning to love our gentle lady, and methinks she would fain see with her own eyes that all was well with her. And, now I think of it, I certainly saw her one day slinking down the stairs which led to the rooms where mother and child lay. Our good lord was absent, and there were but half the usual number of servants, and the women were all terrified of old Margery. If they saw her they crept out of her way. If she watched for it, she might have had many a chance to get sight of mother or babe."

Lord James suddenly sprang to his feet.

"Then that old crone will be our best friend now," he cried. "Verily I believe that she will put an end to all doubt, for those who do doubt.—Boy, dost thou remember taking me once to the hut of the old witch, as ye did call her, the mother of Wild Will, whom ye had set free from the pillory? She spoke then some strange words in my hearing. I gave them little heed then, though the cadence

of them rang in my head for long. 'Hascombe or Beetel,' she chanted, 'Hascombe or Beetel; I know what none beside knows,' or some such words as these. It sounded like some witch's spell, and I got me away from her, for she would not come forth to speak openly, and I had a fear that she might overlook me from within with the evil eye. Now it comes to me that she may have had a meaning in what she said. If you have supped, sweet prince, and are not aweary with the day's work, I pray you let us seek this old woman forthwith, or at least give me leave to go and visit her, and seek to read her riddle, if riddle it be."

The prince was on his feet in an instant.

"Nay, but we will go together!" he cried. "I would fain see this beldam for myself. Often enow have I heard of witches, but never have I seen one, though I think I saw the witch's son upon the night when we kept vigil, waiting for the coming of my lord prior."

That memory always stirred the prince to mirth, and in a merry mood he strode along, taking Peter for his companion this time; for Lord James and Edmund were somewhat too grave and serious for his taste, as they well might be, in prospect of the evidence they hoped to win from the lips of the old woman. A thousand memories came over Edmund as they strode along—memories of words spoken, strange, incomprehensible words dropped by the old woman in their hearing, words that seemed to imply the knowledge of a secret which was known to her and to no other.

Peter meantime was glibly explaining to the prince

the motive that might easily have sealed the old woman's lips. She had wellnigh been done to death—a fiery death—by Lord Hascombe's father; and she long hated and reviled the name, whilst full of her odd, wild gratitude to the house of Beetel. It was likely enough that if it had come to her knowledge that the son of John and Mary was being reared as the heir of the Earl of Hascombe, she would take a delight in watching the thing through—noble made a peasant, peasant exalted to the rank of noble. And yet she had come to feel an equal fondness for and gratitude towards both the twins, as they had been called; and it was likely enough that, hearing all now, she would speak out what she knew, especially if she was called upon to do so by the lips of a prince.

“Let her speak freely, and by the word of a prince she shall not rue it!” cried young Henry. “But how has this old beldam, living here in this wood, come to know the secret that was hidden from the world—the secret that the boys had been mixed up till none knew them apart after the sickness?”

Peter shook his head wisely.

“She hath a familiar spirit that tells her these things;” and then, with a sly glance out of the corners of his eyes, he added, “Methinks the spirit may be a black cat, belike, or perchance just a pair of long ass's ears!”

The prince laughed heartily, and slapped Peter on the shoulder.

“A pair of ass's ears do excellent service, i' faith!” he

cried; "and it hath been told me, moreover, that the ass is a marvellous sagacious brute, for all that men have ever made a gibe of him."

But at this moment they were approaching the thicket wherein stood the witch's hut, so screened from view by the close growth of the trees, and by the solid hedge which had been planted round it, that only those who knew the way thither well could be sure of finding the place.

The prince was much interested, especially by the clever cutting and trimming of the hedge, which was like a solid green wall, with only one narrow doorway giving entrance to the small garden of herbs lying about the cottage itself. Lord James noted how this hedge had grown and improved since his last visit; but the cottage door stood fast shut, and though smoke curled up from the chimney, there seemed no life about the place, and the gathering gloom of night gave to it something of a weird and uncanny aspect. But the prince seemed to know no fear; he strode to the door and rapped upon it lustily with the hilt of his sword.

"Open, good mother," he cried aloud, "open in the king's name to the king's son; and, on the word of a prince, no hurt shall befall thee."

In spite of all its blithe merriment, there was an air of command about the prince's orders which seldom failed to make itself felt. The door was cautiously opened a little way. Wild Will poked out his head, and seeing Edmund standing a little in the background, he gave a cry like that of a dog who finds his master after long absence, and

sprang upon him with a bound of rapture, leaving the door of the hut open, and exposing to view the figure of a strange old woman, bending over a pot slung over a ruddy fire of logs, though at that moment her head was turned, and her wild, black eyes were fixed full upon the intruder in the doorway.

The prince motioned to the rest to stand back.

"I would speak to her alone," he said, and strode inside, closing the door firmly behind him. Lord James looked uneasy for a moment. His belief in the power of witches was strong, and he had no wish for the prince to meet with some mischance in the old woman's hut; but Edmund, seeing the look, answered as though he had spoken.

"Have no fear; she would not hurt him if she could. I misdoubt me if she hath the powers they talk about. But this she knows, that it was the king's son who spoke kindly to Wild Will, and who was our friend and champion on that night of triumph a year ago; and she would do naught to harm him."

The darkness gathered as they stood outside the hut and from time to time heard the laugh or the voice of the prince within. At last the door opened, and he came out, and linking his arm within that of Edmund, he cried,—

"Come, good comrade, and we will settle this matter right soon. I have the key of the riddle in mine hands; and let us but get to a better light, and all doubt will soon be ended. Let us to the hostelry in the town,

where our men await us; for on the morrow, as soon as it be fair day, we must e'en pay a visit to our good friend the prior, and see if he has forgotten what the word of a prince is like."

Edmund had no trouble in finding his way through the wood and to the town, and Peter ran on in advance to warn them of any obstructions in the path. Lord James brought up the rear, fuming with impatience to know what the prince had learned; but he did not press the question, for it was already recognized amongst those who saw the prince at court, and knew somewhat of his nature, that he did things in his own way, and would not be hurried by the impatience of others.

They had thought to find the town asleep, and were amazed to see on approaching it that it twinkled with a thousand lights, and that the streets were thronged with people, as though at some great occasion, such as a bonfire or a like display.

"By the beard of St. Anthony, but they keep late hours at Gadhelm!" cried the prince. But Edmund exclaimed,—

"They must have got wind of who was so near. This stir is in thine honour, sweet prince."

Henry laughed; he was not ill pleased. He loved the applause of the people, and to feel himself beloved and admired. As he entered the town, and the light fell upon his ruddy face and golden-red hair, a cry and a cheer went up from the bystanders, and a shout rolled along the streets,—

"The prince, the prince! it is the prince himself!"

Henry possessed the royal gift of remembering faces, and addressed several of the citizens by name. His progress was a princely one from the gate which he had entered by to the lodging in the best inn, which had been hastily prepared, and whither the leading citizens had carried much sumptuous stuff, to make it a fitting resting-place for the king's son.

In gay good-humour the prince ordered the landlord to bring out a quantity of his best wine, and invited the citizens to drink with him to the health of the king, and to the confusion of all evil plots. An inkling that something was going on at Hascombe Hall—that some ill was intended to the heir by the foreign princess, who had scarcely been seen by the citizens since her arrival—was already being circulated in whispers. Now it was proclaimed aloud that the prince had come himself to Gadhelm to see things put right, and so great was the enthusiasm of the burghers that Henry had some ado to escape from them at last to the privacy of the rooms prepared for him and his immediate attendants.

But at last he shut himself up with Lord James and Edmund, and threw himself, laughing, into a throne-like chair covered with velvet and adorned with gilding.

"Verily, if all my subjects be as loyal to me in my day as the citizens of Gadhelm, I should have a marvellous peaceful and prosperous reign!" he cried. "And now, Edmund Beetel or Edgar Hascombe, whichever thou be, stand forth, and let us set the doubt to rest once and for

all." And so saying, the prince took from his pocket a piece of parchment, which he carefully unfolded, showing thereon, in rather wonderfully fine penmanship, the drawing of two human ears.

"Now listen to the tale I drew from the old woman. Did not one of us say that there were eyes and eyes? Yon old hag has eyes that see what others see not; and she hath taken note of a certain thing in the ear of, first, the old Lord Hascombe; second, his son, the present earl; and third, in the ear of the little infant boy, who lay upon her lap more than once in the days when he was yet at Hascombe Hall, and had not been carried to the mill. She saw him and the other boy at the mill many times after, and always noted the difference in the ear. Moreover, she had the wit to set down what she knew; and it seems that she has some skill with her pen, and can draw deftly what she sees. And here be the two ears—the Hascombe ear and the Beetel ear; and now we shall know which is the true heir."

All bent over the drawing and studied it intently. The difference in the ears lay mainly in a little dent or snip—very slight and very easily overlooked, yet if once observed, quite noticeable—about half-way down the outward curve of the ear. The old woman with her sharp eyes had observed this slight peculiarity in old Lord Hascombe's ear, where it was distinctly pronounced, and in that of his son. She had observed the same slight dent in the ear of the infant heir, and had made a mental note of it. When she suspected, and her suspicions grew

to certainty, that no one really knew which boy was which, and that they had been confused in infancy, and that it was only guesswork that had given them their respective identities, then she had made her careful drawing, and had set down in few words how the heir of the Hascombes might be distinguished. She had not chosen to part with her secret as yet, caring little herself for the matter, learning to love both boys for their goodness to her son, and willing to let things take their course until she saw some way either of profiting herself or of helping them by the declaration. She had never afterwards verified the truth herself; she let things go their own way, avoiding any close inspection of the boys. But the prince's word and the prince's gold had unlocked her heart, and she had parted with her precious parchment to him gladly enough, when she knew that by its means a wrong might be set right, the iniquity of the wicked princess—whose son had sought the death of poor Will—exposed, and both the boys made happy by being brought together once more.

“And now, good Edmund, let us look at this ear of thine,” cried the prince; and both he and Lord James bent over the lad's head, holding the light, and looking breathlessly for what they should see.

“'Tis there! 'tis there!” cried the prince, bursting into a loud laugh, and hilariously slapping Edmund's shoulder; whilst Lord James only stayed to set down the light ere he flung his arms about the boy, crying, almost with tears,—

"Mine own kinsman, my nephew, fair Geraldine's son! Did I not know it from the first? Were we not drawn together even in thy childhood? The Kildare blood! the Kildare blood! Is it not stronger than aught beside?"

"So there, my lady princess," cried the prince, "we have a wonderful fine story for thee! The lad thou hast taken so great pains to win over to Holy Church—thou and the worthy prior of Gadhelm—is naught but the miller's son, who could bring no grist to that greedy mill! The heir of Hascombe Hall stands here, and is of very different kidney from his so-called twin. Thou wilt not cozen or coerce him to thy will, my lady. Zounds, but I would the daylight were here, that we could begin this merry sport, this baiting of prior and princess!"

"Ay, let her turn her hatred upon me!" quoth Edmund—for he must go by that name in these pages for a while, since to change would but confuse the reader—"or rather, that false friendship, which has been more fatal than open enmity. That she always had for me; and I wonder now whether she did not see somewhat that made her suspect—" He paused, and passed his hand across his eyes. "I am bewildered; I scarce know now who I am. But woe to any man who has done hurt to Edgar! He shall answer it at the point of the sword, be he tenfold a master of magic!"

It was long before sleep came to Edmund that night, and with the first streak of dawn he was awake. His heart was beating with glad throbs as he rose and dressed,

for upon this day would Edgar be given back to him, or the King of England's son would know the reason why.

Soon after daybreak the preparations for the start were all made, and the prince was being served with his breakfast—always a matter of moment to him. He was in a very merry mood, called Edmund to him, sent for a sword, and knighted him "Sir Edmund," in presence of his servants and some of the citizens.

"I cannot frame my lips to the other name," said the prince. "Thou wilt be ever Edmund to me, and therefore thou shalt have the right to call thyself the good knight Sir Edmund, for the jest of a prince is as good as the choice of a father. Now, good Sir Edmund, let us forthwith to horse; and keep thou by my side till this day's work is done."

In the clear brightness of the morning they rode to the priory, and the prince ordered his men to blow a mighty blast upon the horns they carried at their girdles, as well as to knock with a resounding clang upon the quaint iron knocker at the great gate.

A monk looked out at the grating, and asked their business.

"My business is with the lord prior," said Henry haughtily.

"The lord prior is about to hear mass," answered the monk, and looked as though about to close the grating, when Henry's voice rang out clear and loud, making the whole air vibrate.

"Tell the lord prior that the king's son desires instant

speech of him ; and as for thee, thou insolent knave, open yon gate at once, or thy frock shall not protect thee. Open, I say, on the word of a prince, else shalt thou and thy prior rue it to the end of thy days."

The monk gave a frightened cry, the great gates swung open, and the prince and his party rode in ; whilst a cheer broke from the ranks of the citizens, who were watching the parley from afar.

CHAPTER XXI.

PRIOR AND PRINCESS.

THE prior did not keep them waiting long. The news that the Prince of Wales was in the precincts, and desired speech of him, flew like wildfire through the building.

Henry and his followers were ushered with great show of respect into the beautiful and lofty refectory, the groined roof of which, together with the graceful carved stone pillars, aroused his quick notice and admiration; and almost at once the great doors at the far end were thrown back, and the prior appeared with a following of the elder monks, who were all filled with a certain anxious curiosity as to the cause of this visit.

Young Henry, the king's only son, was beginning to show himself somewhat of a power in the kingdom. His father was respected; his rule was seen to be beneficial to the prosperity and peace of the land; no one wished for any change; he had been accepted by the country as both conqueror and legitimate successor to the crown, and by marriage and policy alike he had strengthened his position greatly since his accession. Yet with all this he was not personally beloved. His manners were cold and reserved;

his very virtues of moderation, economy, and far-sighted prudence, whilst commanding men's respect, did not win their affection; and his methods of replenishing his exchequer were certainly in many cases decidedly unpopular.

But with young Henry, the prince, matters were far otherwise. He was possessed of his father's determined force of character and intellect, combined with an extraordinary personal charm that affected all those who were brought in contact with him. It was a charm difficult to define, for the young prince was often bluff to a degree, almost cruel in the candour of his outspoken jests and remarks, and yet he almost invariably won the hearts of those about him, and exercised upon them an immense and invincible fascination.

This fascination the country was already beginning to feel. The citizens of London adored the young prince, who would go out to Shooter's Hill to watch the 'prentice boys and craftsmen at their games, and speak words of praise and give loud shouts of applause to the victors in the various contests of strength and skill.

He welcomed all to the sports in Greenwich Park. He never denied himself in person to rich or poor. He would listen with patience to the humblest petitioner who sued his favour, and though his acts of justice were often of a very summary nature, there was a rude justice in them that appealed to the hearts of the bystanders, and which, if it sometimes evoked a certain fear, yet went far to win the approbation of his subjects that were to be, and to increase the esteem in which he was held.

Already there were whispers abroad that the health of the king was not of the best, and that his life was not likely to be prolonged for many more years. Men regarded the Prince of Wales as one who might soon be reigning monarch, and this factor went far in winning for him a universal homage and deference, even amongst those who were not moved by personal love for himself.

This was the case with the prior of Gadhelm and his satellites. They bore no love for the young prince who had come amongst them once for their great discomfiting, and who showed a strange mixture of reverence for Holy Church and defiance of some of her trammels. Men had whispered before this that when young Henry became king it was likely enough that the country would see some strange changes in matters ecclesiastical. That impatience of Romish tyranny characteristic of the nation had showed itself in the prince in flashes of anger and scorn. Habit and custom are powerful fetters, and the fashion of regarding the Pope as the universal spiritual arbitrator would die hard. Yet there had been indications before this that the English nation would not indefinitely submit to his tyranny, and if she ever were to make a stand against it, where could she find a fitter champion than in this bold Tudor prince?

These matters were not spoken of openly as yet, but there was a seething in the minds of the people of this and other lands—a conviction that champions of truth and purity and a different form of faith would one day be needed to stem the tide of abuse that was growing and

gathering to such fearful dimensions ; and the ecclesiastics themselves, behind the safe shelter of their monastery walls, sometimes felt or heard the mutterings of the coming storm, and were therefore in no haste to stir up quarrels on their own account with the higher powers.

This was somewhat the frame of mind of the prior of Gadhelm as he made his appearance in response to the summons of the king's son. He made his obeisance with a lofty dignity of demeanour, and spoke a courteous welcome to the prince, but all the while there was a sense of disquiet in his heart, and his eyes searched the faces of Henry and his followers, till they rested with a look of surprise and curiosity upon the familiar countenance of Edmund. He began then to understand the nature of this visit, and to see that there was nothing of necessity menacing in it. His chief feeling at the moment was one of amaze that the miller's son should have dared to approach the Prince of Wales on such a trivial matter, and that young Henry should have so interested himself in the affairs of a miller's son.

"My lord prior," said the prince, advancing a step nearer, after formal greetings had been exchanged, "I am told that you have here under your care a pious youth who designs to devote his future life to the service of Holy Church, and who, in the fervour of his zeal, denies himself even to his own father and brother, as a further proof of his deadness to all carnal ties. Is this thing sooth?"

"It is, good my lord prince. Great grace hath been given by our blessed Lady to this young noble, and he is

ready to forswear all things that the world has to offer, that he may become her son and servant for ever."

A gleam shone in the prince's eyes as he made response.

"Truly it pleases me well to hear of such devotion in the pious youth. But how come you, my lord prior, to speak of him as of noble birth? The youth of whom I make inquiry is no noble, but the son of the miller of Hascombe, and his name is Edmund Beetel, who, through some strange confusion of identity, has been passing as the heir of Lord Hascombe."

The prior's face grew livid beneath the mask of its impenetrable calm. His eyes flashed past the prince's face and fixed themselves upon that of Edmund—as he had always called him hitherto. The prince followed his glance, and laying his hand upon the lad's shoulder, drew him forward, smiling, and said,—

"This is Lord Edgar Hascombe, though he scarce knows his own name as yet. The lad for whom I am making inquiry is one Edmund Beetel, his foster-brother."

The prior came a step nearer, his face working with a strange mixture of anger and fear.

"I crave your pardon, gracious prince, but heed not the false words and claims of yonder youth, who has been from his infancy a froward and hot-headed rogue, ready to do and to dare all kinds of malice, so as he can compass his own ends. He has been here before this seeking to get speech of Lord Hascombe's son, that he might turn him from his holy purpose. Now he seeks by masquerading in false colours to cozen your highness into some belief

in his trumped-up tale. That is Edmund Beetel, the miller's son, swear he never so lustily to the contrary."

"Tush, my lord prior," answered the prince, with a gleam in his eyes, before which the prior fell back a pace; "I am not here to bandy words with you as to any saying of mine. I know what I know, and what the world has yet to learn. Lord Edgar Hascombe has come hither with me and his uncle, Lord James Fitzgerald, to seek news of his foster-brother, Edmund Beetel, whom you have here. I am not to be trifled with, my lord prior. Send instantly for the lad who has been these many days keeping his retreat here. Let him be Edmund Beetel or Edgar Hascombe as fate shall decree."

As the prince spoke his name, Lord James came forward and took his stand beside his nephew, laying a hand upon his shoulder. He was known by sight to the prior, and at that moment the likeness—the eagle, Kildare expression—between those two came out so vividly that the ecclesiastic turned visibly pale, and fell back yet another pace, gazing breathlessly at the two faces. The prince turned and looked, and a laugh broke from his lips.

"Dost doubt thy prince's word now, good my lord prior?" he asked.—"And since ye greedy monks have no such great prize in the humble miller's son, go one of you instantly and bring him hither to us here, or by the mass—"

Henry stopped. After all, these men were ecclesiastics, and the threat died away in silence; but there was that in his face which showed that he was not to be trifled

with. And now the prior stepped forward once more, an unwonted humility in his aspect.

"I pray your pardon, sweet prince, for having suffered an untruth to pass my lips, but the youth whom you seek is not here at all. He has never left his father's—Lord Hascombe's—house."

"A truce to your monkish lies!" cried Henry with sudden fury. "How do ye dare seek to cozen me thus? Have ye not told a hundred stories of the piety of this youth in his retreat within your walls? Get you hence and bring him, or, by all the holy saints in the calendar, I will know the reason why!"

A gust of that fury which in later years made Henry a terror to his court came over him now for a brief, passing moment, and the monks shook before it like a corn-field over which a hurricane is sweeping. The prior hastened to explain.

"Good my lord, listen for a brief moment, and all shall be made clear. It was by the desire of the princess—our gracious lady of Hascombe—that this story was told. But all this while she has her husband's son—as she believes him to be—safe in her own keeping in some secret chamber of the Hall. He is only to be given over to us when he has been forced into submission, and has consented to take the vows that will bind him for ever to Holy Church."

Edmund uttered an inarticulate exclamation of rage, but the prince repressed him by a gesture, and spoke himself, his eyes all ablaze.

“Unfold to us, then, the meaning of this vile plot, else shall the king hear of your evil doings, and he will know how to call you to account.”

The king's power in claiming heavy fines from all classes of the community, the monks not excepted, was well known throughout the country by this time. The prior had no mind to sacrifice his own hoards and those of the priory for the sake of this foreign princess, whose favours had as yet been confined to fair words and promises. Moreover, there was that in the aspect of the prince which warned the bystanders that he would brook no further delay, nor any kind of temporizing, and the prior gave up now any attempts at concealment.

“It is no plan of mine,” he said. “From first to last it has been the work of the princess and her ally Dr. Antonio. She regards her husband's eldest son as the enemy to her own boy. It is not enough that he should inherit her lands in Italy; he must have his father's title and estates in England too. From the first that has been her purpose. She only set herself to see how best it might be accomplished. It seemed to her that the lad would be pliable in her hands but for the influence of his foster-brother. Him, therefore, she feared and hated from the first, and sought to get out of her way. She succeeded thus far in her aim that he was sent for three months travelling with Lord Hascombe. She never thought but that the three months would become four or five. The southern temperament understands not the energy of the sons of the north. She believed herself to have much more time to work in

than the event proved. Therefore, when news of Lord Hascombe's speedy return was suddenly brought to her, it found her still unready."

"Unready for what? What was her plan?" asked the prince. "Did she mean to kill her stepson?"

"Not unless she was driven to it through his obstinacy," replied the prior.

A dark frown gathered on Henry's brow.

"Nay, now, thou art a worthy son of Holy Church, methinks, my lord prior, that thou dost speak with calm of such a matter as the compassing of the death of an innocent lad, that another may take his inheritance. But let us hear more of this godly plan. Thou and she have doubtless made it together. I can half guess it myself. Thou shalt tell me if I have guessed aright. The youth was to be cajoled or threatened, or otherwise maltreated, till he was ready to swear to become a monk; and then the vows were to have been administered in all haste, and he brought prisoner here, for a reward thou and thy worthy flock were to receive from the worshipful princess—a largess in recompense for the help given her in the godly work. Speak, my lord prior! Was not this so? And doubtless you and yours did hope that in the future some other gain might accrue to your priory from the residence there of Lord Hascombe's son. Some claim might so easily be set up, and Holy Church sweep at least a portion of the broad lands into her greedy maw."

The prior's face had assumed a dusky-red hue indicative of suppressed passion. He dared not let his anger burst

forth against the king's son. There was that in young Henry's aspect which inspired fear; for it was abundantly evident that he was deeply roused by the tale he had partly heard and partly divined.

"I have had no hand in the matter, good my lord prince," he answered, "save that I have seen the youth from time to time, to give him godly admonition, and seek to turn his stubborn heart and incline it towards the paths of righteousness and holiness—"

"Nay, but that is a fitting lesson for thee to teach, holy prior!" flashed out Henry. "I marvel greatly how any youth could be so stubborn as to hold out when such a holy man of God came to counsel and plead with him! And yet he has remained obdurate! Strange, passing strange! And has he learned that his holy preceptor has been giving out to the world this fair string of lies, to cozen and deceive the father, and give the princess time to complete her devilish task? My lord prior, the world has yet many lessons to learn from Holy Church—lessons in falsehood, malice, and cruelty."

The wrath and chagrin of the prior suddenly blazed forth.

"And I have done all this for a base-born miller's son! I would never have touched the matter had I known."

"Now, that can I well believe," answered Henry, with ringing scorn in his tone. "Holy Church, as you and such as you understand the term, will have naught to do with good or ill but for the gain to be gotten from it! Is not the soul of a miller equal in God's sight to that of a

prince? And is not the sin of a monk blacker in His eyes than the sin of an ignorant churl? You have taken vows of holiness, and you traffic with the devil; you have the keys of knowledge in your hands, and you sin with open eyes against the light. Methinks in the world to come that hell will be full of such as you. Ay, and I care not who hears me say it. I am not afraid to speak the truth. Mark my word, the day will come when reckoning will be made for these open abominations."

Then turning upon his heel, the prince marched from the hall, without so much as a farewell salute to the prior; and in a few more minutes he and his followers were clattering out of the great paved yard, on their way to Hascombe Hall.

"If yon false prior speaks sooth in this, and methinks he would not dare to deceive, we shall find Edgar—or Edmund, whichever you will call him—beneath his father's roof. The little maid has a shrewd head on her shoulders. But it is ever the shrewd ones that are flouted, and the liars that gain the ears of the world.—Lord Edgar," he said, turning to the youth who rode behind with a face full of trouble and ill-repressed impatience, "as we ride through the town, get speech of some of thy comrades, and bid them go to the mill and tell the miller and his wife to take their way to Hascombe Hall without delay. It may be we shall need them there. The earl will doubtless want speech of Mary Beetel when all the tale is told."

"But you will hasten there right speedily, sweet prince," pleaded Edmund. "I know not what that evil Dr.

Antonio may be practising upon Edgar. I feared and hated him from the moment I first saw him ; yet little did I think—”

“Nay, be not too much afear'd. Edgar—if so thou wilt call him still—is yet alive, else I know not my man. The prior would have been more greatly affrighted had the lad been done to death. Thou shalt have sight and speech of him ere another hour be passed. So take hope and courage, good Sir Edmund, for thou shalt not wait much longer for thy desire.”

It was still early in the day when the little cavalcade rode up to Hascombe Hall, and the earl's horse stood ready at the door, whilst he was himself engaged in a game of play with his children in the great courtyard, where they had gathered to see him mount, as they often did.

Startled by the clatter of horse-hoofs, the little ones ran up the steps towards the great door ; but suddenly a shrill cry of childish joy rang through the air, and a voice cried out,—

“Brother Edmund ! Brother Edmund ! It is brother Edmund come back !”

Then before any one could interpose to stop her, little Geraldine had rushed in amongst the prancing horses, and was stretching her arms up towards her big brother.

He was on his feet in a moment, and had her in his arms.

“Dost know aught of Edgar, little one ?” he whispered, as her soft hair brushed his cheek.

“I am sure he is somewhere in the tower,” she whis-

pered back in frightened response, clinging closely about his neck the while. "But we can never find him, though we have looked and looked; and I thought that thou wast never coming back."

"Base churl, unhand my sister!" shouted a furious voice almost at his ear; and Edmund looked up, to see Hugo approaching as if to strike. Suddenly he was grasped from behind by a strong hand, as the prince seized him by the collar of his doublet, and with a quick twist almost throttled him, whilst at the same moment he dealt him two such sounding smacks with his open hand, one on either ear, that Hugo when released reeled away dazed and half stunned, the tempest of his passion driven backwards for a moment by sheer astonishment and breathless impotence.

"Have a care!" shouted Edmund, as he saw him preparing to spring at the throat of his chastiser in lithe southern fashion, his hand seeking already for his knife. "It is the king's son! It is Henry, Prince of Wales!"

The sensation throughout the courtyard was something strange to see. Servants and men-at-arms dropped upon the knee, heads were uncovered, and the earl himself came forward to kiss the hand of the royal guest, whilst little Geraldine, of all the company unabashed, scrambled down from Edmund's arms, and ran full tilt towards the prince, crying out,—

"I love thee. Thou art brave and good; thou dost love Edmund, and dost punish wicked Hugo. Oh, if thou art

a prince, come and help to find Edgar! He is in prison somewhere near, but none will believe what I say!"

"Then, sweetheart, it is time that a prince came to thine aid," answered Henry, as he took toll of the childish lips so sweetly lifted to his; "and by the faith of a prince thou shalt not want Edgar long, for I have come all this way from London to find and give him back to you."

Then seeing the blank astonishment and dismay upon the earl's face, the prince turned to him with courteous gesture, and said,—

"My lord, you are something astonished at all this; but you will soon see what the meaning of it is. And I pray you let me have speech also of the lady princess, your wife. I have come far to see her, and the learned man, Dr. Antonio, of whose fame I have heard. If I may so far demand it, let the whole household be summoned to the great hall, where this matter may be plainly discussed. But tell the princess, your wife, only this, that Henry Prince of Wales has come, and would fain be presented to her. The rest I can achieve for myself."

Lord Hascombe felt like a man moving in a dream. He gave one searching look at Edmund, and started as he did so, for there was his kinsman, Lord James Fitzgerald, beside him. Or was it all some strange illusion? And was that Edmund, after all? or was it some young Kildare, come with his brother-in-law? Had Edmund always worn that likeness to Lord James? What did it all mean? Were his senses deserting him?

Lady Hascombe, much excited by the news that the

Prince of Wales desired to be presented to her, was not long in getting her tire-women to array her in her costliest robes. She felt sure that the praises of her beauty must have reached the prince and brought him down to Hascombe Hall. It was with graceful step and an air full of dignity that she swept down at last into the hall, to meet the gaze of a large assemblage; and there, seated in a sort of state which perplexed her somewhat, was a youth she instinctively knew to be the king's son, who rose at her approach, and greeted her with dignified courtesy.

Then he addressed himself to her in a voice that carried well through the length and breadth of the hall.

"Madam," he said, "I have come far for to see you, and, in truth, the praises of your beauty have been in no sort too loudly sung. But I would remind you, princess, that there are other qualities in a noble lady more to be desired than beauty. King Solomon himself has written as much, and he is credited with considerable knowledge upon the subject. Lady Hascombe, not to beat about the bush, I have heard a story of you which I like not, and I have come myself to know the truth of it. Is that old man yonder with the flowing beard the astrologer who is known by the name of Dr. Antonio?"

The princess had changed colour, and was visibly agitated, but the old man's face was like a mask; only his eyes appeared to have the power of expression, and these glowed brightly beneath the snow-white brows.

It was Lord Hascombe who made reply, feeling all the while like a man in a dream. He answered that

Dr. Antonio had come over from Italy in the train of the princess, and was accounted a very learned man in all matters connected with the stars.

“Yes, so I am told, and in other matters also,” returned the prince, an upright line beginning to show between his brows. “He is also said to have marvellous skill in the matter of slow poisons—poisons which work by such soft and insidious degrees that the progress can scarcely be marked, yet which in time—if rescue come not—will slowly and surely sap away life itself.—Is that so, Dr. Antonio?”

The princess turned white, and cowered backwards in her great chair; Lord Hascombe gazed at the prince like a man bereft of the power of reasoning. Dr. Antonio bowed in his dignified way, and replied in his low, quiet tones,—

“I have learned many strange things in the course of a long life. The use of drugs, and of poisons and their antidotes, has come under my notice many times. I have some skill in the art of healing.”

“And in the art of killing too, perchance, learned doctor,” said the prince sternly. “Now tell me plainly this thing”—here his glance shifted to the face of the princess—“where is the lad who is known to the world as Lord Edgar Hascombe?”

A look of livid fear and anger swept over the face of the princess, but ere she could speak Hugo had burst out passionately,—

“What mean you, sir, by thus addressing the princess, my mother? I care not if you are a prince; I am a



WALTER PATER

"Madam, where is the boy that you know by the name of Edgar Hascombe?"

Page 395.

prince too. I will not stand by and see her thus flouted. That puny Edgar is to be a monk. He is with the prior, dreaming dreams and seeing visions. There let him stay. We are not here to give reply to your questions; begone, whoever you are, prince or—”

Henry turned the light of his glance upon Hugo, and the word was stopped ere it reached his lips.

“If that upstart lad speaks again,” said young Henry to his servants, “arrest him, and bind him fast. I will have no insolence from such as he. Honest English bravery I know how to respect, but the swaggering impudence of a southern-born boy—faugh! it sickens me.”

Having given vent to this expression of fine insular prejudice, Henry turned to the princess once more.

“Madam, where is the boy that you know by the name of Edgar Hascombe, and who stands in the position of your husband’s heir?”

Her terrified gaze sought Dr. Antonio’s face, but that remained absolutely impassive. She looked in despair to her husband, who spoke for her, though he spoke like a man in a dream.

“What my younger son spoke, my lord prince, was the truth, albeit it was a malapert act of his thus to interpose. My eldest son, Edgar, is at present with the monks of the priory in Gadhelm. He has become enamoured of the life of the cloister, and at present will see none—not even myself—save the pious monks who consort with him. It is not the life I would have bidden him choose; but if the choice be his own—”

“The choice is not his own!” suddenly thundered forth the prince. “My lord, I grieve to have to tell you, but you have been foully cozened by your lady wife, and tricked by her and by her slave and servant, yon white-bearded man, who, were he subject of mine— But let that pass. The lad you think to be your son, your firstborn, the inheritor of your title and estates, has never been to Gadhelm Priory, has never kept retreat there, has bravely withstood the artifices used to induce him to take monkish vows, and is now within the walls of your house in close imprisonment, being subjected to arts which, if they do not break his mental firmness, will end by depriving him of life; and that is the handiwork of the princess, your wife—

“But,” thundered the prince, as the hum of excitement and amaze died down, “the lady, like others who dare so much, has never been even near to achieving her aim. The boy she has in her clutches is not your son. He is the son of John and Mary Beetel of Hascombe Mill. Yonder stands your son, Lord Edgar Hascombe, with his uncle, Lord James Fitzgerald, to vouch, in a fashion that none will care to deny, to the truth of what I say.”

All eyes were turned for a moment in the direction of the two figures towards which the prince was pointing, and a strange thrill ran through the hall. It was followed by another sound—the sound of a piercing shriek. The princess had fallen face downwards upon the floor, and lay there like one dead.

CHAPTER XXII.

JUST IN TIME.

THE sound of a suppressed cry rang through the hall, and there was a general forward movement towards the prostrate princess, upon whose prone figure the eyes of the prince were bent in cold displeasure.

It was noteworthy that at that moment Lord Hascombe made no attempt to approach his wife, but stood like a man dazed and stunned, his glance turned full upon the faces of Lord James and the nephew who so closely resembled him, oblivious for the moment of time or place, or of anything save an overmastering flood of conflicting emotions.

Dr. Antonio was the one person in that place who seemed to retain his full presence of mind and power of action. He approached the prostrate form and raised it slightly, and then beckoned to the servants to come and lift her.

The sound of steps and the movement about him suddenly roused Lord Hascombe from his trance. He started and turned towards the group around his wife, and pointing his hand imperiously, he said,—

“Take her away! take her away! Let me not look upon her face till this foul charge has been proved or disproved.”

"She shall be taken to her own apartments, my lord," spoke the calm voice of Dr. Antonio; "and I fear that this seizure may be of a serious nature. It has ever been my task in life to seek to keep all sudden agitation from the princess, whose system is not fit to encounter it. You will bear me witness that this day's work has been no doing of mine."

"Seize that old man!" spoke the prince in his most imperious way. "Seize him, and bid him lead the way to the place where his captive lies."

Hands were instantly laid upon the old man, who offered no resistance, but merely gave direction to Lady Hascombe's women, who were flocking terrified towards their mistress, what steps to take for her recovery.

"I am the only person who can save her life, if saved it can be," he remarked; "but if I am perforce dragged away, let her death be on the heads of those who force me from her side."

"There will be another death for thee to answer for if we hasten not, I trow," spoke the prince, in the same stern fashion. "Show us where thy captive is immured, and then thou mayest go back to practise thy witchcraft for good or ill upon thy mistress. A worthy couple, in very truth! You may thank your patron saints, the pair of you, that you are not subjects of mine, nor even of my father's."

Lord Hascombe came unsteadily forward, and grasped the old man by the arm.

"Is this thing sooth?" he asked hoarsely. "Hast

thou my son in durance vile somewhere within this very house? Hast thou been cozening and deceiving me with lies?"

"I have been obeying in all things the behests of the princess, my mistress, and thy wife," he answered quietly.

Lord Hascombe groaned aloud, and his hand dropped.

"And thou hast had Edgar here all the while?"

"It seems not," replied the old man, who was moving all this time through the long corridors of the house in the direction of his own particular tower. "It seems that we have been wasting our time and skill upon a worthless object—worthless for our purpose, that is. A woman's instinct should ever be trusted. From the first moment of seeing those boys, it was the other one my lady feared and hated, though she scarce knew the reason why. She regarded this one with scorn and contempt, and believed that she could easily bend him to her wishes. She found him less pliable than she had supposed when she had him at her mercy. But come, my lords and gentlemen; you shall see for yourselves. The word of the prince must be obeyed. For me, I am but the humble servant of my mistress. What you see is but the accomplishment of her purpose towards him whom she believed to be her husband's heir."

Again Lord Hascombe groaned. It seemed to him as though the foundations were giving way beneath his feet. Ever since he had brought the princess and her children to England he had begun to feel misgivings that had never assailed him before. In the purer atmosphere of his native

country the spell which the beauty of the princess had exercised upon him began to wane. He found her capricious, tyrannical, jealous, hard to please; and as for Hugo, the boy was almost intolerable in his haughtiness, self-will, and ferocity. Many had been the moments when qualms had come over him as to the wisdom of his second marriage, doubts as to whether it would be possible to bring up his second family in their English home. The younger children throve, and seemed to rid themselves of the traditions in which they had been reared; but Hugo and Bianca were their mother's all over, and it seemed to him that she encouraged them in all their faults and vices, defending them, whatever they did, and almost teaching them to rebel against any authority which their father might seek to impose upon them.

But with all this he had never for a moment entertained the suspicion that there was worse behind—not even when Edgar had been missing, and when Edmund had spoken to him so urgently of his own fears and little Geraldine's whispers. The story he had heard was plausible enough. Such things were of frequent occurrence, and Edgar had always seemed to him just the sort of boy to dream dreams and see visions, and never had it crossed his mind that foul play could be mixed up in the matter.

Now a veil had, as it were, been ruthlessly torn from his eyes. He saw the whole plot in its naked truth, and at this moment it seemed to him as though he could never look again upon the face of his wife. She had been in

heart and purpose a murderess, and her victim was to be him whom she thought to be her husband's son. The whole thought was terrible, even for days when crime was all too common. Lord Hascombe had ever been a man of gentle and placable temperament. The thought of such cold-blooded cruelty revolted him more than it would have revolted another in like case. It was less a burning rage that possessed him than a sense of loathing and repulsion.

He had no time to readjust his thoughts to the fact of the change in the identities of the boys. He had almost forgotten that point, indeed, as he pressed after Dr. Antonio towards the masked door at the bottom of the long flight of steps. How had that old man learned the secret of the hiding-place of Hascombe? He had almost forgotten it himself, though he remembered having been shown the trick of the door long years ago by his father, and having once or twice penetrated into the great dark chamber where in days gone by fugitives had been hidden whilst the tide of pursuit had rolled by.

The old man calmly pressed the unseen spring, and the solid masonry itself seemed to swing back on some hidden hinge. An aperture was thus revealed which proved to be a narrow passage, and beyond could be seen the dim glimmer of some unseen lamp or candle, whose ray was reflected against the damp walls of the underground passage.

There was the sound of a sharp, fierce cry, almost like that of a wild creature in defence of its young, and a figure flashed past the earl and his guide, and dashed in front towards the light.

“Eddie, Eddie, mine own brother, what have they been doing to thee?”

It was Edmund who had recklessly dashed through the ranks of those who pressed towards the hidden chamber. When the rest reached it, they found him flung upon his knees beside the low pallet-bed, whereon lay a recumbent figure; and when the lights that the servants brought with them revealed the whole scene, the prince and his party beheld a cavern-like apartment, evidently partly of natural formation, that had been turned by artifice into a roomy chamber, and used during the past fortnight for the prison of the boy, whom they believed to be the true Edgar Hascombe.

It was indeed he who lay upon the pallet-bed white and motionless, though not absolutely unconscious, as the clinging pressure of his fingers upon Edmund's revealed. But so death-like was the face, and so wasted and skeleton-like the frame, that Lord Hascombe turned suddenly upon the white-bearded guide and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat.

“Wine!” cried Edmund urgently to those who crowded in. “Give me wine and cordial—food—anything; but hasten, hasten, hasten! Truly we are but just in time, if we are in time at all.”

The servants flew to do his bidding. The generous wine was brought and poured down the boy's throat. He swallowed it, and lay still for a moment, with closed eyes and death-like face.

The prince strode up fiercely to the old man, who had

some trouble to retain his mask of quiet indifference and calm.

"Thou devil!" he cried; "if that boy dies I will myself see to thy just recompense, be thou of what nation thou wilt! Get thee to thy place, and seek out some drug which shall act as antidote to the poisons thou hast already given. Nay, lies will not serve thee here. Go thy way.—Take him to his evil den, some of you men of the household. Lose not sight of him, but let him get thence what he will.—Go, thou aged miscreant, and bring back the thing that is needful to undo thy devilish work; or if thou canst not or will not, thou shalt die by inches, as thou hast wellnigh caused this boy to do, and I will see that thy sufferings are not brief nor few!"

There was such concentrated fury in young Henry's tone that all trembled to hear him.

"I go to do thy bidding, O potent prince," spoke Dr. Antonio, "even as I have done the bidding of the princess, my mistress. The boy will not die. I can straightway recover him. He will but feel some weakness for a while, and be sound as ever."

A gasp like one of relief went up from some of the bystanders, who were more than half afraid that Edgar was already in the grip of death. In a very few minutes Dr. Antonio returned, and in his hands were sundry phials, out of which he dropped pungent-smelling unguents, some of which he rubbed upon the boy's face, round the lips and nostrils, and some of which he dropped into a wine-cup and persuaded him to swallow.

The effect was very quickly seen in a slight access of colour and in a perceptible strengthening of the respiration; and the prince clapped his hands at seeing the signs of improvement, and cried in his gay, imperious way,—

“So far so good, Master Magician; but let us get him out of this damp, dismal, and fetid hole. It is the pure air of heaven and God’s blessed sunshine that will be his best medicine now. Let him be carried forth into the air; then shall we see what measure of life there is in him still.”

Edmund was simply panting to have his brother out of this dim and ill-omened spot. It was he and Lord James who lifted the thin, light frame, and bore it tenderly up the narrow, winding steps, and out into the warm, soft summer air—not into the full glare of the sunshine all at once, but beneath the soft shadow of a great beech-tree, where already the servants had prepared a couch of soft skins and down cushions, such as the princess loved to surround herself with, and upon which the emaciated boy was luxuriously laid, whilst again Dr. Antonio approached and administered some of his mysterious drugs.

Edmund hated to see the man go near him, yet was conscious that had slow poison of any sort been playing a part in this tragedy, it was likely that he alone possessed the secret of the antidote. Certainly the livid blue tint began to leave Edgar’s face, and a more natural look to return to it; then presently the blue eyes unclosed and fixed themselves upon Edmund’s pale, eager face, and a faint voice exclaimed,—

"Edmund! Oh, then, it is not a dream! Or has it all been a dream?"

Edmund fell on his knees before the couch, and seized Edgar's hands in his.

"Leave them together for a while," said the prince to Lord Hascombe; "I warrant that his brother's presence will do as much for him as the magician's drugs. Let that old devil go to his mistress, and see what he can do for her. Let him instruct Edmund what to do for the boy, and not come near him again. 'Tis enough to bring back the fever, methinks, to see that evil face hanging over him!"

Slowly they moved away, only little Geraldine and Otto remaining in fascinated wonder, with a couple of servants to fetch anything that might be needed.

Lord Hascombe let himself be led away like a man in a dream, and when he reached the hall once more he turned upon Lord James and cried,—

"What is the meaning of all this? Which of them twain is my son? And what has happened all these years that the thing should only be brought to light now?"

"That wilt thou hear best from the good miller and his wife, and from Martin the steward," answered Lord James. "They are here to tell all the tale, and right glad will all be that this puzzle shall be cleared up once and for all. Bid me call them, and thou shalt know all."

Lord Hascombe made a sign of assent. His face was aged and haggard. He looked like a man upon whom

some great blow has fallen, the full consequences of which he cannot measure at once. It was noted that he made no inquiry after the princess—not so much as to ask whether she were living or dead. It seemed as though a part of his brain had become numb and dead, and that only the other half was active and alert.

The prince had seated himself once more upon the seat of honour that had been set aside for him, and he watched with keen interest the entrance of the miller and his wife, of the two Martins, and, last of all, with lagging step, but yet with a look of keen interest in her flashing eyes, the misshapen figure and wizened face of the strange old witch-woman, whom last he had seen in her hut bending over her cauldron, and answering his questions with the strange oracular utterances of the sibyl.

The prince flashed a look of friendliness towards her, and she bent low in response. He had passed his word to her that no one should hurt her, and it seemed to him that she came hither to-day in the strength of that assurance; for was it not said of her that she never left her hut in the forest, and that she went ever in fear of being taken and ducked or burned as a witch?

Mary Beetel told the whole story of the infancy of the boys—how she had for a while been uncertain as to which was which, but how it had seemed to them all in time that the doubt had been set at rest. Martin and his wife corroborated the story, and Lord Hascombe and Lord James listened in deep interest. Edmund's robust boldness and hardiness had been put down to the Beetel blood,

as Edgar's delicacy and dreaminess had been thought a sure indication of his gentle descent.

"Ye did forget that Kildare had claim upon the Lady Geraldine's son," quoth Lord James with a short laugh; and then he told his own tale—of his encounter with his young kinsman in London town, and seeing Kildare "writ large" on every feature, in every tone of the voice, and every unconscious gesture.

Then the prince spoke of his interview with the old woman, now beckoned up to tell her tale. The parchment was produced, upon which the drawings had been made; and Lord Hascombe instantly recognized the family mark of the dent in the ear, though he had not given the matter a thought since his own boyhood, when he used to stand behind his father's chair and observe the indentation so noticeable in him.

"It is slighter in your lordship," said the prince, rising, and approaching to look, "and perhaps slighter still in Edmund—shall we ever learn to give the pair their right names?—but there it is, clear to see; and you have to thank the sharp eyes of yon old woman, since it is due to them in part that we can lay this matter to rest so completely and with such satisfaction."

"I give thee thanks, good mother," said the earl; "and forasmuch as thou hast loved the boys, and they have loved thee and thine, I will give thee a groat a week for thy lifetime, and thou mayest live in peace and safety in thy cottage, and none shall be suffered to molest either thee or thy son."

The old woman bent low, and embraced the earl's knees in her gratitude, after which, producing a small phial from her wallet, she said,—

“Let me but see the lad who has been so foully done to, and I warrant me I have here what will do him good. I am no witch, good my lord, as I did tell our noble prince; I am but a poor old woman who has lived all her life with the wild things and the herbs of the field and the wood, which have told her their secrets one by one, and so given of their healing medicines into her hand.”

“Well spoken, good mother,” cried the prince heartily; “we will even go now and see the lads. Thou shalt show us what thy skill can accomplish, and Lord Hascombe shall be convinced by the sight of his eyes that Edmund is his very own son.”

Here the prince's gaze fell upon the flushed and tremulous face of Mary Beetel, and he realized that here was a mother yearning over her youngest-born child. He gave her a friendly smile, and motioned her to follow them.

“Yes, yes, good mistress, thou art pining for a sight of thy boy, I warrant me; and truly it will be well that the one who is the sick and feeble should be he who has a mother to tend and comfort him. I trow that he will quickly regain health and strength lying by the mill-pool, hearing the plash of the falling water, and fed by the hands of one who is master of such skill in the cooking of dainties as I for one have not forgotten. Beshrew me if I think not that the lad we have called Edgar hath the best of the bargain! I would fain be a miller's son myself

sometimes, and pass a peaceful life, far from the strife and tumult of scheming courtiers and the jealous strivings that ever encompass the paths of the great."

They all passed out together, prince and nobles, peasant and aged "witch-doctor"—out into the sunny brightness of the courtyard, and so through the door into the pleasance, where Edgar lay with his hands locked in those of Edmund.

Little Geraldine rushed forward to meet them, hesitated a moment, and then made a dash for the prince.

"It is you that have done it—you that have done it! They all say it! You have got Edgar back! You have brought Edmund home! You will punish that cruel, wicked old man! You found out his secret and rescued Edgar! You are the prince, the fairy prince! I love you for being so brave, and kind, and good! I love you for being so strong and clever, and for getting the victory over wicked Dr. Antonio!"

The prince laughed as he took the child's two hands in his, and stooped once again to kiss her.

"I trow thou wilt live to see greater victories and wonders than those of to-day, sweetheart. But bring me now to Edgar and Edmund; and tell me, how does the sick brother?"

"He says he is well, now that he hath gotten Edmund, and that he can look upon God's blessed sunshine again," answered the child.

And in truth there was a very visible change in the appearance of the youth, even in one short hour. White

and wan and feeble he must needs be for many days to come, but that death-like aspect had passed, and there was a light in his eyes again, and a smile of absolute contentment upon his lips, which smile deepened and brightened as he saw the approach of the prince.

He struggled to sit up, and Edmund supported him to do so.

“O good my lord prince, how can I thank you?” he began, and then stopped, for Henry had come and laid him back on his cushions with a tenderness one would hardly have thought that the bluff prince possessed.

“Go to, go to; thou hast naught to thank me for. What is a prince set in his place for by a righteous God, if not to see that oppression and robbery and injustice do not prevail, and that evil-doers are fitly punished for their misdeeds? Would that I had a thousand eyes and ears and feet, that I might learn all the mischief that walks abroad in this land, and go forth to trample it into the dust! No prince is set in his high place for his own advantage, but for that of the people over whom he will one day rule.”

At that moment Mary Beutel crept into sight, and seeing her boy lying before her so wan, so white, so frail, her mother's heart overflowed with a sudden passion of sorrow; and forgetting all beside, she ran hastily forward and clasped him in her arms, the tears coursing down her cheeks.

“O my boy, my boy!” she cried. “O my son, that I should find thee thus!”

The comforting clasp of those fond arms brought Edgar's childhood back to him; after all, it was only one short year of his life that he had believed himself other than Mary's son. The tie of sonship always seemed to bind those two together. He clasped his feeble arms about her neck, and whispered,—

“O mother, mother, mine own mother! Have I ever had any mother but thee?”

Lord Hascombe heard the question; he had been standing looking intently at the two boys. Now he came and bent over Edgar, saying,—

“Thou speakest sooth, my boy. I have somewhat to say to thee, but perchance thou must wait for all the story. But thou art right to call good Mary thy mother. Wilt thou be taken to the mill, to be cared for and nursed back to health by her? Edmund shall go with thee, and perchance there thou wilt forget those days of misery which thou hast passed beneath the roof of Hascombe Hall.”

Edgar held his mother's hand fast; he looked with shining eyes into Lord Hascombe's face.

“Then is it so indeed?” he questioned. “Ah, methinks I knew it ever; yet how could I refuse what was said to be mine? I am the son of the mill; and Edmund there—he is Lord Hascombe's son.”

They had not guessed that he would be so quick to leap to the conclusion; but they did not know all that the boy had lived through in memory during those long days of his captivity in the dark dungeon.

"Boy, boy, how hast thou divined the truth?"

His eyes lighted vividly.

"Then it is the truth! Ah, I am glad, I am glad! I was never fit to be the heir of Hascombe. I felt it in my blood. I knew that Edmund was nobler than I. I have told him so, and he has bidden me be silent. But in the darkness, and when fasting had brought strange thoughts and memories and visions upon me, I seemed to understand all. 'Twas that which helped me to stand firm when they would have cajoled and threatened me into making vows. My head was not too clear, yet methought it would in some sort be like signing away Edmund's heritage to his foes. That was what they wanted—I knew it well—to get one into the cloister (the heir, as they thought); perchance to send the other once more over the sea to slay him there, since they had failed to slay him the first time—"

He paused, for the prince had made a sudden movement, and was regarding him with searching glance.

"Of what speakest thou, good lad?" he cried. "Has there been a plot against the life of Edmund too?"

Edgar passed his hands across his eyes; weakness made all this excitement bewildering to him.

"I thought they spoke of it in whispers," he said; "I thought that Hugo openly derided me, and told me he would never return. They had plenty over there in Italy to do their bidding; but Edmund made himself beloved of all. The very men who were pledged to the task would not lift hand against him. I heard something

of it, and the princess fell into a great rage when she heard that he was back again with my father—with Lord Hascombe—and that he was to be received at the Hall as one of the other esquires. Is it a dream? I cannot tell—all is so strange. But methinks I heard talk of that sort. Perchance Geraldine will know.”

“Hugo said that Edmund would never come back,” cried the child. “He said so many times, and was wroth that I would not believe him. Hugo is wicked: he hates Edgar and Edmund; but I love them. I would send Hugo and Bianca and Dr. Antonio back again to Italy; we shall never be happy whilst they are here. They are cruel and wicked, and they frighten me.”

“Not when the prince is by to take care of thee, sweetheart,” said Henry, holding out his hand, which she took in both of hers.

“No, not when the prince is here,” she answered confidently. “But the prince will be wanted back in fairy-land, and then Hugo will be wicked and masterful and cruel again.”

“Perchance the prince will have a word with that same Hugo ere he goes,” answered the other with a laugh. “The prince is not one who loves to leave any matter half done that he has taken in hand.”

Lord Hascombe’s face had grown very pale, and was contracted by pain. The utterances of Edgar and Geraldine were like the stabs of some sharp sword, piercing to the very core of his being. The woman he had loved so well, had taken for his wife, had allowed to dominate his whole

life by her beauty and her powerful will—that woman was a murderess at heart. She had no scruple of pity where her passions were concerned; her conscience was dead. Pride, avarice, lust of power—these ruled her whole being; and she hesitated not to commit any crime, so long as her own children might profit thereby.

He stood speechless and broken, and those about him addressed to him no word. They could see that the iron was entering into his very soul.

A servant approached from the house.

“Good my lord, Dr. Antonio has sent me to say—”

“Never name that human fiend in my hearing again!” suddenly thundered forth the earl in a voice of concentrated fury.

The man shrank back appalled. He had never heard his lord speak in such tones before.

He would have retired forthwith but for the urgency of the message he was bearing. He could not pick his words now; he could only state the naked truth.

“Good my lord, the princess lies a-dying. If you would see her alive, you must come in all haste.”

“Dying?”

“Good my lord, it is a seizure of the heart; she has had such before. The priest has been with her. She is breathing out her life. If you would see her ere—”

He said no more. Lord Hascombe suddenly wheeled round, and strode with rapid, determined steps in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LORD HASCOMBE'S HEIR.

HE paused upon the threshold, and signed his brow with the sign of the cross. A deep sense of awe fell upon him as the curtain dropped behind him and he stood within the threshold of the chapel. The air was dusky with the smoke of incense, the perfumes of which mingled with that of the flowers which lay about and around the central object before the altar—a mass of whiteness in the midst of surrounding gloom, the concentrated light of innumerable candles throwing that whiteness into startling relief.

A few kneeling forms were to be descried round and about; but the boy's eyes swept over them one by one, and he saw that they were but hirelings who knelt beside the dead body of their mistress. His father was not among them. The dead woman's husband kept no vigil beside her upon this first night. A thrill of something strangely akin to pity ran for the first time through him as this conviction came home to his heart. He had heard of the sudden death of the princess almost without a qualm; the thought which had entered his mind had been

that it was but a just retribution. Yet now as he stood and gazed towards the solemn white figure, looking like a marble effigy, draped by its white pall, a sense of the strange power of death swept over him with overwhelming force. What had come to him—to her—to so change the thoughts and feelings that earlier in the day had raged within him? How was it that he no longer hated her, no longer felt his blood boil at the thought of what had been? How was it he could stand there looking towards her mortal remains, and feel that the enmity and hatred of months was all blotted out?

It was by his brother's wish that he was here. It was Eddie—the old name had been given back to the one who seemed to shrink in bewilderment from hearing himself styled Edmund—who had bidden him come hither, who had sent him away from his side when he woke in the night and found him still watching.

"Go to our father," he had said; "he must be so lonely. Go and comfort him, brother. And as thou goest, go into the chapel, and say a prayer for the repose of the soul of the princess. We can only pity her now; and if she sinned, it was for love of her own. We may not judge her, brother."

It had not been possible to keep from Edgar the news of the sudden death of the princess. The knell of the passing bell tolling from the tower had spoken the tidings all too plainly, and he was too weak to grow excited over any fresh event.

So Edmund had gone forth, and in the calm, still moon-

light had trodden the familiar path through the great beech glade; and as he walked in the solemn quiet of the silver night, strange thoughts had stirred his soul, and the burning anger which had been hot within him these many days, and which had run like a fever through his veins, seemed slowly to grow cool, to pass quite away, to sink into strange insignificance.

He had spoken so many high-sounding words of vengeance, and behold the vengeance had been taken out of his hands by a power infinitely above him. "I will repay, saith the Lord." The boy had fancied that the very woods were whispering these words as he passed along. They had filled him with a strange sense of awe—a sense of the impotence of man, even of princes—a sense such as he had never before experienced of the ever-watchful, never-failing providence of God.

And now he stood within the chapel, his young face full of emotion, his head bowed, his hands clasped together. He made a few slow steps forward. He stood beside the bier. He looked down upon that cold, beautiful face, the features set in the majestic solemnity that comes to almost all when death has set his seal upon the brow.

A slight tremor passed through his frame as he stood. A host of strange thoughts arose in his heart. A hundred questions assailed him. Where was she now, this proud princess? The mortal part of her lay still before his eyes; but where was that restless, striving, scheming spirit? Where was the part of her that had animated

the beautiful clay, that had loved and hated so well, and had been called to account in so sudden and fearful a manner? The youth's ideas upon such points were vague and hazy. He believed in the doctrine of purgatory as an article taught by the church. He would have answered, had one asked him, that all souls passed into some purgatorial state, whence the prayers of the living and the masses offered by the church on their behalf would some day release them. But the words conveyed little meaning to his mind. Masses would certainly not be lacking to the princess. She had wealth and to spare, and would have all that money could buy for such a purpose. But over Edmund's soul there swept that fateful question that was soon to shake all Christendom: Could it be that money could bring pardon for the sins of a misspent life? Could the redeeming blood shed upon Calvary for all the world be bought with gold? Was not one hour of true penitence for sin, one last dying look at Him who was slain, worth all the subsequent masses that wealth could purchase?

He suddenly fell on his knees before the altar, burying his face in his hands. Over him, like a great flood, there swept the remembrance of his own many sins, failings, and shortcomings, his pride and haughty temper, his eagerness for strife and battle, his lack of reverence for holy things, his quickly-roused hatred, his hopes for vengeance, and lust of power.

Suppose it had been his fate suddenly to be called to his last account, was he in any fit state to meet a just

and sinless Judge? Lower and lower sank his head as thoughts came crowding upon him. It came upon him almost for the first time in this hallowed place that of him to whom much is given much will be required. He had scarcely realized before this moment that he was in truth the heir of his father's possessions, that his position was utterly changed during these few last days, that he was one to whom a great trust would one day be given. As it was, he would have more power than he had ever dreamed of possessing, and how would he acquit himself in that trust?

"Lord have mercy upon me! Christ have mercy upon me! Lord have mercy upon me!"

The familiar words of the church came to him in this hour of illumination, and were repeated over and over again, with a sense of the depth of their meaning which had never penetrated his soul before. He thought of his penance before the altar of the little chapel in Gadhelm, and how he had then resolved to cure himself of his haughtiness and pride. How little had been accomplished! How quickly the old flame of anger and passion had blazed up! How soon good resolutions had been flung to the winds!

"Lord have mercy upon me! Christ have mercy upon me! Lord have mercy upon me! Our Father which art in heaven—"

A great and sudden calm fell upon his spirit—a strange hush, as though the key of some great mystery had been put into his hands. "Our Father"—whence came those

words? By what right were they spoken by sinful, fallen man? Even by the right of the sinless Man, the sinless Son, in whose most holy life and death the church takes her stand, and taught by Him, addresses the Most Holy in holy boldness—"Our Father!"

The great bell overhead boomed out the hour of midnight. The priest came forth in his robes for the midnight mass—the first to be recited for the peace and repose of the soul of the princess. There was a slight stir and movement behind him, and Edmund felt a little soft hand slipped into his. He turned his head and saw a small clinging, black-draped figure at his side, the golden hair escaping like a cloud from beneath the sable coif. His fingers closed strongly over the little, cold, trembling hand, and he drew the motherless child very closely to him as he knelt so near to the mortal remains of her whom in life he had called his bitterest foe.

He did not look behind him. He knew not who else was there; but he held little Geraldine within his arm, and knew at last that she had fallen asleep to the cadence of the priest's voice and the swinging of the censer.

When the office was over he lifted her gently in his arms and bore her away to her own room. He gave a quick glance round the chapel as he did so, and he saw that his father was not there.

"I must go to him, as Eddie bade me," he said to himself, as he gave the sleeping child into the arms of one of the women; and he turned towards those rooms that had always been Lord Hascombe's private apartments,

and where the servant on duty told him that the earl was to be found.

"But he has forbidden any to come to him. He will eat no food, nor will he speak to any. He is like one distraught by grief. Lord Hugo sought him earlier in the night, but could not obtain speech of him. Pray Heaven the trouble turn not his brain, for he has ever been a just and merciful master."

Edmund said no more, but passed into the antechamber, and lifted the arras so that he could look into the room beyond.

It was quite dark, save that the window stood wide open to the summer night, and a great shaft of moonlight lay athwart the floor. It was some seconds before Edmund's eyes could distinguish his father; indeed, he heard the voice before he had made out where he was sitting.

"I have desired to remain alone," spoke the voice. "I would not be disturbed by any."

Edmund dropped the curtain and came forward with hushed steps.

"I have not come to disturb you, father; I have come to seek to comfort you."

For a moment there was silence; then the voice said,—

"There will be no comfort for me save in the grave."

"Ah, say not so, father, dear father!" cried Edmund, suddenly flinging himself at his father's feet, and possessing himself of both the cold, nerveless hands; "you have so many to love you still. The cloud will pass; it

will be blotted out. To-day has been a strange and a sorrowful one, but there will be sunshine on many morrows."

"And who art thou that speaks thus to me?" spoke Lord Hascombe, with a quiver in his voice.

"I am thy son—thy son Edgar; albeit I know not myself yet by that name. O father, father, father, give me, even me, a father's blessing! I will seek to be such a son to thee as thou wouldst fain have. Sweet father, let me comfort thee; thine other son Edgar has sent me for that very purpose. Father, thou hast two sons in us to love and honour and comfort thee. Let us wipe away thy tears, and teach thee happiness again."

Lord Hascombe's hands were upon the boy's shoulders now. He was trembling with emotion.

"Is that Edmund's voice I hear?" he asked—"Edmund as I have known him hitherto?"

"Yes, father; let me be Edmund still, for the nonce. I know not the other name yet. Thou hast ever called me so; call me so still, I prithee."

"I had thought that Edmund would be the first to revile and to curse me for being the dupe of that woman."

"Father, she is dead. Let us speak no harsh words of her. It may be that at the last she repented and sought forgiveness from God. If He has pardoned her—as I pray and believe—shall we not do the same?"

"Edmund, Edmund! it is the voice of Edmund, but the words are the words of Edgar—gentle Edgar, whom I left a victim in their hands to be done to death."

“Yet God protected him, father,” said Edmund quickly. “God was with him all the while. He has told me so himself. Indeed, he says that he suffered very little. The strange, slow poison robbed him of all sense of hunger, albeit they sought to reduce him so by fasting that they would make of him an easy prey. Yet he suffered no gnawing hunger, only a faintness sometimes; and with this such a strange illumination of mind and spirit, such a sense of freedom from the trammels of the flesh, that he says he was strangely and wonderfully happy, had no fears, no longings after liberty, save now and again when a craving for sunshine and free air came upon him, or some recollection of me, and a desire for my presence. But for the most part he lay as in a trance, only troubled when they came to urge him to take the vows upon him that should part him for ever from us. He was always conscious then of something evil—of the necessity to fight and to struggle. He would afterwards lie and think, and think, and many new thoughts and convictions came to him thus. He seemed to read the riddle of our childhood then, and to have some strange knowledge of the mistake which had made him Hascombe and me Beetel. But he was not unhappy, he did not suffer; all through he had a consciousness of some protecting power. He knew he was being watched over and cared for, and that all would come right at last.”

Lord Hascombe's face was buried in his hands. Tearless sobs were shaking him. The pent-up emotion of that long terrible day was finding its vent now.

"I had thought my son would never forgive; I had thought that I had lost them both in one day."

"Father," said Edmund quietly, "I deserve that thou shouldst think thus of me. I am part Kildare, and I have much of that revengeful pride which is the badge of their house, together with bravery and other attributes which I would gladly share. It is a just rebuke to me that thou shouldst thus have thought. But believe me, I would not be the judge in this matter even if I could; and how dare I judge one who has passed so suddenly away? Nay, let me only seek to comfort thee in this thy great bereavement."

Then Lord Hascombe suddenly stood up and flung out his arms, and, staggering towards the window, leaned out as one who is choking for air.

"God forgive me if it be sin, but the worst horror of this thing that has come upon me is that I feel no grief, no sense of loss. I am rather like a man from whose shoulders some intolerable burden has rolled. And yet I would have sworn, up till to-day, that I loved her."

Edmund stood silent and almost aghast. He had never seen a man in the grip of such strong emotion. Lord Hascombe was fighting down the overmastering access of feeling, and presently he turned back into the room and sank into a deep chair like a man exhausted.

Edmund quietly took law into his own hands now. He strode to the door, ordered food and wine to be brought to the room, lighted a fire of logs upon the hearth, and then tended the worn-out man as gently and tenderly as

a woman could have done, till the tense, drawn look passed from the face, and the dull, glassy stare from the eyes, and the chilled, stiff limbs had regained their wonted powers.

Then the earl held out his hand, and the boy put his willingly into the now firm and loving clasp.

"Mine own son—my very son! Why did I not know it always? Boy, has not something told us, in a whisper in our hearts, that we were near of kin? Was it not with some reason I would not willingly have it otherwise? Why was it I was so blind?"

"Had mine Uncle James come before, we had known the truth sooner," answered Edmund; "but what matters it so long as all be well at last—save for that tragedy?"

He paused. There was silence between them, long and deep. It was the father who spoke first.

"My son," he said, "perchance I have said too much not to say more; yet why should there be secrets betwixt thee and me? I have said that I cannot mourn for the princess as a man should mourn for the wife of his bosom, and this, alas, is true; but our blessed Lady knows that I would weep for her if I could. I have striven to forgive that which is past, but how can I lament for one who in heart and spirit was—"

There was no need to speak the word. Edmund turned his face slightly away. Lord Hascombe continued speaking, sometimes slowly and mournfully, sometimes with impetuosity.

"Yet that was not all. I have been slow in the

learning, but of late it has been as though a veil were torn from mine eyes. I have seen things to which I was blind before. I knew not to what lengths it would carry her, but I saw her vindictive, cruel, evil in many of her thoughts and ways. I found myself trusting her less and less; I found it more hard to restrain my anger when I saw how she encouraged the boy Hugo in his wildness and self-will, and taught Bianca that even her will was to be law. I saw how she frightened and estranged her younger children, because they were English in their ways and tastes, and loved to be with me, and were always asking for Edgar and marvelling that he came not back. Why I remained so blind I cannot guess, for in other matters I was beginning to suspect that all was not well. I had made certain discoveries, but of them we will not speak. I trusted her less and less, and yet in that matter I had no fear. It seemed all so like the Edgar I had known—”

“Hadst thou truly known him, sir, thou wouldst not say that.”

“Belike that may be so, but it was like the Edgar I thought him to be, and I had much else to consider just then. I did not believe—how should I?—that the prior would lend himself to such a scurvy trick. Ah me! ah me! What will not men do for greed of gold!”

“The prior will not gain by that piece of wickedness,” broke in Edmund, with a little gleam in his eye. “The prince knows all, and he will not forget. The day may come—”

Lord Hascombe suddenly started to his feet in dismay.

"The prince, the prince! I had forgot the prince!" he cried. "What have I been doing that I should have so illustrious a guest beneath my roof and neglect him thus? Where is the prince? Where is he lodged? The saints preserve us! but this is scurvy treatment for the king's son, who comes to help us in our hour of extremity."

"Have no fear, father; all is well," answered Edmund. "The rumour of the presence of the prince in Gadhelm flew far and wide, even ere the day had well dawned, and the thing coming to the ears of my Lord Leston, he rode over to pay his homage to the king's son; and as this house had just been plunged into confusion by the tidings that the princess was dying or dead, it seemed well to the prince to ride away with Lord Leston to his house, that he might not intrude here—these were his gracious words—at a time of bereavement. But he bade me convey to you his condolences in the untoward event, and his regret if any too sudden speech on his part had been the immediate cause of the seizure. He added that he would himself be present at the obsequies of the princess, if that would be any consolation to her husband or children."

"The prince is kind," answered Lord Hascombe thoughtfully, "but there will be no obsequies for the princess here."

Edmund looked at him questioningly, but spoke no word.

"I have been thinking of it all these long hours," continued Lord Hascombe, "and the more I think of it the stronger grows my resolve. The southern princess shall

not lie in this land; she shall be buried beside her first husband in the vault of her Italian castle. Dr. Antonio is learned in all the arts of the embalmer. He shall prepare the body for transportation, and he shall take it thither, where it shall be entombed amongst her own kindred or in her husband's vault, as they shall decide. To-morrow I send forth a courier to Italy with the news. I desire no control over her revenues and lands there. The care of these will I make over to her brother, together with the guardianship of young Hugo, the heir. He and Bianca shall go back to Italy, to their kinsfolk. To them has their mother willed her property upon my decease, and I will touch nothing of it. Those children are not fit for life in England; they are all Italian. Let them go back to those who will know how to deal with them. I have never been permitted to enforce my commands upon them; I am not going to try now. They shall return whence they came—their mother's children every inch of them. In justice, perchance the other two should likewise go; but the little ones are so different. I should sadly miss my sweet Geraldine; and the boy Otto will be a solace to my declining years, when thou, my firstborn, art abroad in the world, taking thy rightful place with the nobles of the land, perchance in the train of the prince himself."

"Ah no; let us not part with little Geraldine and Otto. They are dear to me—brother and sister—as the others, methinks, could never be. We will make an English knight of him; and for her—well, we shall soon see what havoc of hearts she will make when she blossoms from

child to maiden. But I am glad that Hugo should go. Methinks the peace would be something hard to keep were he and I in the house together."

Lord Hascombe's face hardened.

"There are times when it comes over me that Hugo, child though he be in years, has been in some sort the evil genius of his mother. What did we hear about a plot against thy life out yonder in Italy? Murder is so easily done there. Have I not seen it? And was not Hugo cognizant of both the plots that were working out, the motive of each being his advantage and advancement? Oh, blind, blind, blind that I was! I scarce know how to look upon that boy's face again. The image of his mother too!"

For Hugo, Edmund had nothing to urge. The boy had seemed to him from their first introduction more like a young demon than a human child. The thought that he was to be sent away from Hascombe Hall—sent back to his native land—was a source of unmixed pleasure to him.

They talked the plan out together through the short summer night, and at the dawn Edmund led his father for the first and only time into the chapel, to kneel for one brief moment by the bier of his wife, and breathe a prayer that her sins might be forgiven, and gaze upon the face that once had been dear, but that now had grown almost hateful in his eyes.

He looked, and the hardness passed from his face.

"May she rest in peace," he murmured, crossing himself,

and so passed away from the sight of her who once had been so near and so dear.

* * * * *

It was a brilliant day in early June when a very stately procession passed from under the great gateway of Hascombe Hall and took the direct road for the coast.

The whole foreign suite that had come with the princess to England were returning now, with no little satisfaction, to their native land; and with them was the old man, so reverent and dignified of aspect, who went by the name of Dr. Antonio. He, however, wore no look of exultation or satisfaction. He appeared more shrunken and aged than ever he had done before, and he seemed to ride with some difficulty, as though the infirmities of age had suddenly come upon him.

The remains of the princess were conveyed in a specially-constructed carriage, which would transport them to the town of Southampton, and afterwards along the stretch of country which lay between the harbour of Genoa and the lands which were to pass to Hugo, and to be ruled for the time being by the brother of the princess—a man of somewhat autocratic and fiery temper, who, with his wife, would probably keep Hugo and Bianca under a stricter discipline than they had ever dreamed of before.

And indeed the faces of these two were dark and sullen. It may be that their father had thought fit to speak to them upon the eve of their departure as he had never spoken yet. Be that as it may, Hugo rode apart with

lowering brow and down-bent eyes, neither looking about him nor returning any salutations, as he had been fond of doing hitherto, taking upon himself something of the air of the young lord and master. Bianca kept her face shrouded in the long black veil which she wore about her head; and she was so little known in the neighbourhood that only a few of those who had gathered to see the procession pass realized that this was the princess's daughter.

Lord Hascombe, in his sable garb, with Edmund—Lord Edgar, as the people were at last beginning to call him—at his side, rode first. Edmund was habited likewise in black, but he was only to go a certain way with the procession, after which he would return to look after the administration of the estate in the absence of his father. The earl would be forced to accompany the body of his wife upon its melancholy journey, be present at the obsequies, and make all the necessary legal arrangements for the property and the guardianship of his children. Letters from Italy had been received. The relations made no objection to the proposed plan, but Lord Hascombe would of necessity be absent for a while from the country, and he had asked Lord James to remain at Hascombe Hall with his son, to give him such help as should be needed there, till his own return was possible.

All Gadhelm had come forth to see the procession pass. The story, in a thousand different versions, had been bruited through all the countryside. It was in vain to seek to keep the family scandal secret, when a crowded hall had been the witness to the prince's challenge and the sudden

seizure of the princess. Lord Hascombe was personally liked and greatly pitied, and his son was beloved by rich and poor alike. The sight of the two riding together evoked a hearty cheer and a simultaneous baring of all heads; but when the scowling face of Hugo was seen, a little later, a groan went up from the bystanders, and some voice in the crowd cried out,—

“There goes the true son of a murderess!”

Lord Hascombe did not hear, for he was rapt in thought, and the voice spoke the words cautiously; but Edmund heard them, and turned in his saddle to see Hugo's shining blade half drawn from its scabbard.

In a moment he had dashed up to him, seized the weapon, and flung it to the ground.

“Boy, art thou a fool, or worse?” he cried, with flashing eyes. “Wilt thou stain every step of thy life with bloodshed? Hast thou not seen too well already whither such evil passions lead, and what is the end thereof?”

Hugo's look of vindictive hatred was an evil thing to see.

“Thou art amongst thine own people, Edgar Hascombe, else would mine answer be very different,” hissed the boy. “But come to me in mine own land, and thou shalt see what reward thou shalt get for thy many acts of interference, and thine insolent, intolerable words. We know in Italy how to deal with such malapert upstarts, thou son of a mill!”

“Better the son of a mill than the son of a murderess!”

Both lads started and faced suddenly round. Edmund's

cap was instantly doffed, and he would have sprung to the ground, but that the prince by a gesture forbade him.

"So the wolf-cub shows fight yet. Well, well, so be it. He is going to his own place; let him see that he abides there."

Prince Henry's gaze was fixed sternly upon the face of Hugo, who, half frightened, half defiant, sat scowling and bareheaded on his horse. The servants had fallen back when first the prince appeared, suddenly rounding the bend of the road, with some dozen gentlemen in attendance, most of whom wore Lord Leston's livery. The square, determined face of Henry wore a look that was at once thoughtful and severe. His next words were spoken with great deliberation.

"I shall not forget thee, Hugo Hascombe. It may be we shall meet no more in this world, but I shall sometimes think of thee. The thought, it may be, will serve as a warning, which comes not amiss even to princes, a beacon light to show into what devils men can grow—ay, and even boys scarce out of childhood—when they give rein to their evil passions, and know not restraint, nor brook a lawful control."

So he spoke, and then suddenly wheeling his horse round, he raised his hat as though in respect for the dead woman carried to her last resting-place, and joining his comrades again, he dashed off across the open country at a gallop, and was quickly lost to view in a rising cloud of dust.

CHAPTER XXIV.

COMING OF AGE.

GLAD May-tide was once more upon the world, and the golden sunshine lay broad and full upon the great house at Hascombe, with its terraced gardens, fair woods, and smiling pastures.

An indefinable change had passed upon it during the years in which Lord Hascombe had made his home there. The structure of the house was the same as ever; yet even that looked improved, for the ivy that grew so freely upon the walls was now clipped and trimmed in, and so was always green and glossy to the eye. Several large mullioned windows of the Tudor style had replaced the narrow apertures of more warlike days. The stonework had passed through a process of cleansing and renovating, and some excellent carved work both in wood and stone now gave finish and beauty to the exterior of the house.

But a greater change was to be noted in the gardens. Lord Hascombe had made his gardens his chief relaxation and hobby. He had returned from Italy, after the obsequies of his wife and the tragical events of that time, a weary and broken-spirited man, who believed that for

him life held no happiness in store, who felt himself in some sort disgraced in the eyes of his fellow-men, and guilty of culpable negligence and credulity.

He shunned the society of his peers, he shut himself up at Hascombe Hall with his children for his companions, and he gave himself up to the management of his estate, and in particular to the laying out of his garden, and the transport and cultivation of flowers and trees that he had seen and admired in other places and even in other lands.

Perhaps he could have chosen no better occupation, for his health had been somewhat shattered by the shock sustained when his discovery of the treachery and duplicity of his wife had been followed by her sudden death. He came back from Italy looking so aged and so broken down that many amongst his servants and the citizens of Gad-helm whispered that he must have been the victim of some attempt at poisoning on the part of that wicked old magician Dr. Antonio.

Whether or not such had been the case would never now be known. There was no denying that for some time the earl's health was much shattered and impaired, and that he himself believed his days to be numbered. But the quiet life he led, the number of hours spent in the fresh air and the sunshine, with his two merry little children gambolling round him, the sense of peace and rest which slowly stole upon his spirit, acted like healing balm, and he found himself growing stronger instead of weaker, taking more rather than less interest in life and his surroundings, until the sense of approaching dissolution gradually passed away;

and although the wish to mix with his fellow-men in the world of London, or at the king's court, never arose within him, he began to feel a healthy interest in the affairs of his own little kingdom, and a desire to make it a beautiful home for his own old age, and for the beloved son who would succeed him.

That son was now the pride and joy of his heart, although of late his visits to Hascombe Hall had been somewhat few and far between. The young Prince of Wales had taken such a liking for the earl's son that he had made him one of his personal attendants, and Lord Edgar was heard of here, there, and all over, in the train of the heir of England. In jousts and tourneys, such as Henry loved to organize, he was ever amongst those who carried off the chief honours for dexterity and skill; in masquerades and in the dance he was reputed lightest of foot and quickest of wit. All Gadhelm seemed to share in the pride which Lord Hascombe felt in his son; and there was some cause for this, since the boy had been brought up in their midst, and one master-craftsman or the other could boast with truth that he had taught the lad in his youth the use of this or that tool, the quickness of eye or wrist or body that doubtless stood him in good stead in these more knightly exercises and amusements.

And now the day was approaching when Lord Edgar was to come to full manhood's estate—when he was to come home to be presented anew to the tenants and townsmen as the heir of all his father's lands and wealth and titles. This coming of age had been the talk of the

countryside for weeks, and was more so than ever as the days drew on, and it was seen how sumptuous were the preparations for the coming festivity.

There were to be games and revels in the great meadow hard by the house. An ox was to be roasted whole in the great courtyard, and beer and wine would flow like water. High and low, rich and poor, all were free to come and join the merriment, and to eat and drink their fill. All might compete in the games and sports. All might have free speech of the young lord who had grown up in their midst, and who seemed more of a real friend to them than ever his father could be, though all loved and pitied and revered the earl. But Lord Edgar—as men had come to speak and think of him now—was as one of themselves, despite his rank and fortunes. He had eaten and drunk with them, had gone in and out amongst them in his childhood and boyhood; he had been bred in all their traditions and civic lore, and was loyal to the teaching and even to the prejudices in which he had been reared. Gadhelm and its citizens would always be dear to him. He would never make common cause with any proud prior against the liberties of the burghers. Things had been better in this respect of late. The haughty prior whose rule had caused so much ill-will betwixt monastery and town had resigned his position shortly after the death of the princess, and had gone to Rome, it was said, in the hopes of obtaining, through the influence of her family, a cardinal's hat. Nothing had been heard of him since in Gadhelm, and the sub-prior who now reigned in his stead was a quiet and

placable monk, who was well content to profit by the lessons he had seen taught to his predecessor, and to abandon the aggressive policy that had been such a failure even in stronger hands than his. So the monks and the citizens lived now at peace together, and certainly the new prior found this far more comfortable. His table seldom lacked a fine fat capon, or sucking pig, or brace of ducks, on high days and holidays, sent by some farmer or citizen; and their boundaries in the marsh lands were certainly more generously allotted than in the days when they had sought to grab those that had always been claimed by the burghers. Women and children would bend the knee and ask a blessing from the prior as he passed through the streets, instead of shrinking away with scowling distrust; and monks and citizens would be seen chatting amicably together in the market-place or at the street corners, telling and discussing such items of news as had reached either party, and finding it far more pleasant to be on friendly terms than on those of mutual hatred and recrimination.

Thus peace and goodwill reigned now in a wonderful way round and about Gadhelm—wonderful in that it was not usual for monks, burghers, and nobles to be at peace together, without some cause of strife or jealousy; yet, owing to the quiet, placable temperament of the earl, and the peace-loving nature and prudence of the prior, such was now the existing state of things in Gadhelm at the time when young Lord Edgar came of age.

The earl was pacing slowly up and down one of the fine

terraces that he had constructed with such care. Some people declared that his garden was not English; and it was possible that some of his ideas had been borrowed from the land where he had lived so many years. But at least none could deny that the effect was very fine and harmonious; and in the mellow light of a May afternoon, just as the sun began to wester, and the shadows to lengthen, the beautiful gardens looked almost like fairy-land. Little Geraldine, who was playing with the great hounds and her younger brother up and down the great gravelled walk, paused to look about her and exclaim,—

“Oh, how I wish brother Edgar would come when it all looks just so!”

Otto came running up to his father, crying out,—

“He is coming to-day, father, is he not? And will he bring brother Eddie back with him too?”

“I doubt not that he will,” answered Lord Hascombe. “He has been at Windsor with the prince, and Oxford is but a short ride from thence. Eddie will doubtless have joined them by now, to return with his brother. Where one is the other is—that will I wager—upon a day like this. It would not be a coming of age to Edgar, had he not his faithful shadow at his side.”

Lord Edgar's foster-brother went always by the name of Eddie in his native place. Somehow, although the people had learned to speak of the heir as Lord Edgar, they had never framed their lips to call the miller's son Edmund. That name still seemed to belong in a measure to the young lord. Eddie had been somewhat slow in re-

covering from the effects of the slow poison administered to him ; and but for the tender nursing of his mother, and the skill of the old herb-woman, who was no longer called witch by the people of Gadhelm, he might have pined away and died. He did, however, make a good recovery ; but it seemed as though some check to his physical development had then occurred, for he no longer in any way rivalled his foster-brother in manly force or proportion, but remained slim and slight, fragile-looking and dreamy, and was not able to bear any great fatigue, or to excel in any martial exercise or sport.

For a while it was hoped that he would soon be able to take the place of Lord Edgar's esquire ; and so he could, when Edgar was at home, or his own master. But when in the train of the prince, in the midst of all the gaieties of court life, it was found that the delicate lad was unable to follow his comrade. The exertion was too much for his strength. Lord Edgar at these times would send him away to the university city of Oxford, where he could pursue in peace and quietness some course of study, attend the lectures of the scholars, and live a peaceful, quiet life, until his foster-brother could recall him to his service again, having for the time being leave of absence from court.

At these times the old-time companions would travel about together, seeing something of the world, and paying visits where Lord Edgar was in request ; or visiting Hascombe, and delighting the hearts of all by their appearance there.

They were still devoted to each other, and the periods

of separation only seemed to make them delight the more in each other's company when it was to be had. The idea of Lord Edgar's arriving at Hascombe to keep his coming-of-age festivity without Eddie to share it would have been regarded as an impossible thing; hence Lord Hascombe's assurance that where one was the other would be.

Suddenly Otto sent up a joyful shout.

"They come! they come! I hear the trampling of horses and the clash and jingle of spurs. They are entering the great courtyard now. O father, sweet father, prithee come and let us see them dismount. Oh, when shall I be a man, and ride forth with my brother to see the world and be a prince's gentleman?"

Lord Hascombe gave a hand to each of the eager children. Little Geraldine was still a most lovely little fairy, with floating golden hair, and eyes of velvet softness and darkness. Her sweetness of disposition often reminded Lord Hascombe of his first girl bride; and he found it hard to realize—indeed, he often forgot—that the little maiden and her brown-haired sturdy brother were not the children of the lovely Lady Geraldine.

In the courtyard all was bustle, animation, and joyous confusion, as the noble company rode in, amid the greetings and welcomes of the household.

"O father, look, look, look!" cried little Geraldine excitedly. "Look! there is Uncle James; and, O father, see! There is brother Edgar, and there is another of him! Oh, who can it be? And, O father, look again! Who is that knight all covered with gold over his beautiful white

satin and crimson? Oh, I believe it is the prince himself!"

Lord Hascombe hurried forward with all haste, doffing his hat and bending the knee as he held the stirrup of his royal guest.

"Good my lord prince, I had not looked for this honour," he said, startled by the suddenness of the thing, for he had not been in anywise prepared for such a visit.

Henry laughed aloud as he swung himself from his horse.

"Nay, my lord; but make no stranger of me. Let me come hither as Edgar's comrade and friend. A freak, my lord—a sudden freak. The hunting at Windsor being ended, I am on my way to Winchester, where I owe a visit, and where the king my father looks to meet me. I could not but choose to travel in such a goodly company as this. I crave but one night's hospitality, and to see the early joustings and feastings for my good comrade Edgar; to drink a bumper to the health of the good citizens of Gadhelm, and then to saddle again and away. So heed me not, good my lord. Let me be no marrer of your happiness in your son's return. I see my little sweetheart yonder. Let me have speech with her; and go you embrace your son, and tell me whether he be not Kildare to the very finger-tips. Look at him and young Lord Gerald, the heir of the Kildares, and then ask whether there be any doubt which of the Hascombe twins is the son of Lady Geraldine."

The prince, laughing, again strode through the throng,

that made way for him right and left, and came to where Geraldine stood, her eyes kindling and sparkling in her delight and excitement.

Lord Hascombe, thus freed from restraint, wheeled round, and had his son fast in his embrace. Then spoke the voice of Lord James at his elbow.

"I have brought another nephew hither with me, my lord. Methought it was time that he and Edgar should become acquaint." And so saying, Lord James pushed forward a stalwart youth a year or two older than Edgar, but of so exactly the same height and build, and with so strong a likeness to him in feature, that Lord Hascombe looked at him in astonishment and then at his own son.

"He should be mine own brother, should he not?" asked Lord Gerald, with a laugh. "But what matter what we call him? He is all Kildare, and so am I. And when this festival is over, I will—with your leave, good uncle—carry him hence with me, back to my father and my native land. For he too must learn to know and love the land of the Kildares."

Lord Hascombe next turned to another lad, standing a little in the background—a fair-haired, dreamy-eyed youth, who scarcely looked his one-and-twenty years. He put his hands upon his shoulders and embraced him with tenderness.

"I knew we should have thee back too, Eddie."

"Ah yes, good my lord; I must be here to see my brother come into his full manhood's estate."

"Methinks he would scarce feel that the day was his

proper festival if his brother were not beside him," said Lord Hascombe kindly.

It was a merry party that sat around the board that night. No company was ever aught but merry when the prince was there and in a merry mood. He set Geraldine on his right hand and Edgar on his left. He made much of both in varying degree. He told tales of the prowess of the earl's son, of the triumphs of scholarship achieved by his foster-brother at Oxford; he kept the table alive with his raillery of young Kildare, whose keen Irish wit flashed out again and again, and set the prince in a roar. Lord Hascombe scarcely knew himself or his house in this gay tumult of revelry. And since the prince would have no ceremony, but insisted on being received as a comrade and friend of Lord Edgar's, there was no restraint or needless formality; and the evening passed most joyously away—a fitting prelude for the joyful day to come.

No anniversary could have been more bright and glad; and the presence of the prince helped to throw a greater glamour over the scene. Henry remembered everybody. He went to and fro amongst the citizens; he cracked jokes with the old women, and made pretty speeches to the maidens. He joined in the games of the humble, as well as in the tiltings and joustings of the knights and gentlemen; he seemed to be everywhere at once; and no one did more justice to the roasted ox or the home-brewed ale than did the king's son.

"The beef and the beer of Old England, my friends," he cried, "have helped to make England's sons what

they are this day." And, to the great delight of the company, it was the prince who leaped to his feet after the health of the king and the Prince of Wales had been pledged with acclamation, and made the speech of the day, in which, after thanking them all for their love and loyalty, he proposed the health of the young heir.

The welkin rang to the eager shouts of the assembled crowd, and Lord Edgar bowed his acknowledgments in a tumult that for a while forbade speech.

The day ended as gladly and harmoniously as it had begun, the departure of the prince towards afternoon seeming to mark the meridian of the feast.

"I give thee two months' grace, to stay with thy father and visit thine Irish kinsfolk," he said to Edgar, who held his stirrup at parting. "After that come back to me, for I miss thee in thine absence. Princes can get followers and flatterers enough and to spare; but I know that thou, Edgar Hascombe, dost truly love me."

"I do, good my lord," answered Edgar simply, and without protest.

Henry smiled, waved his hand, and galloped away with his following about him.

Late in the evening, when the silver moon was hanging like a lamp in the sky, Edgar Hascombe and his foster-brother stood side by side at the mill-pool, gazing down into the dark water, and listening to the voice of the tumbling weir, as they had listened to it during the days of their childhood and boyhood.

Edgar laid his arm across Eddie's shoulder.

"Sometimes it seems like a long dream, and I feel as though I should wake to find myself son of the mill once more."

Eddie looked up in his face with a smile.

"Nay, thou art too knightly a man for such a place as that. I could lie in some sweet, fragrant nook beside the murmuring stream, and dream away my life in study and meditation; but thou art made for action, for strife, for fame. How could they ever have thought that I was an earl's son?"

They both laughed; the memory of the year when they had changed identities was often recalled between them with mirth.

"Thou hast no regrets, Eddie? I would give it all to thee if I could."

"I would not have it as a gift. I am happier as I am. And I have a mother as well as a father."

He glanced lovingly at the old mill-house, and his face softened. The brother understood, and smiled.

"I too have a mother's love. She will never forbid me to call her mother."

"But I am her son," said Eddie, and smiled again.

They were silent awhile. The sense of being thus together was strangely sweet and satisfying to both.

"Thou wilt come with me to Ireland, Eddie, when I go?"

"Ay, willingly. I am ever something anxious when thou art parted from me. Sometimes I remember Hugo's black looks and threatening words, and I shiver and long to fly to thy side."

“Ah! poor, passionate Hugo!” said Edgar musingly; “I trow by this time he has learned better. He will have forgotten now that he ever cared for aught save his Italian lands and palaces. England will be but a name and a dream to him. Moreover, our father has told me that he has been under greater discipline since living yonder. His wild spirit has been curbed and checked.”

“I am glad of that,” said the other softly.

“Yes, an ungoverned nature is a terrible thing,” said Edgar gravely, as though he knew something of it himself. But then a lighter vein came over him, his eyes kindled, and he added jestingly: “Still, thou needst not fear for me, brother mine. I am well fenced round with friends and kinsmen. Hugo must have a care how he touches me; for the Kildares have taken me for one of themselves, and thou dost know how our legend runs—‘Who dares kill Kildare, Kildare kills!’”

THE END.

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